

Otherside Picnic: Volume 4

Iori Miyazawa

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Overnight on the Otherside

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File 12: The Matter of That Farm

1

“Hey, look. It’s not that dirty, and we didn’t break much, right?”

What Toriko was saying didn’t make Kozakura stop frowning.

“You’re saying *this* isn’t dirty? Sure, it’s not broken, but—”

“I know, right?”

“...It stinks of violence.”

The three of us were in Kozakura’s house, looking at her bathtub. The house was pretty old—though it looked like the bathroom had been renovated a little—but dirt had been tracked in, and the shower head was lying on the ground. A towel hung from the bathtub’s cover, soaked with blood. Like Kozakura said, there was a foreboding sense that something not so peaceful had gone down in this room.

Footsteps approached from the hallway, and Migiwa of the DS Lab poked his head in.

“The cleaners will be arriving a little late. They were saying that they drove down a one-way street in front of the station and got lost. I apologize for the wait.”

“No, it’s fine.” Though Kozakura was acting a little short with him, Migiwa continued in a polite and respectful tone.

“I will handle the rest, so, please, Kozakura-san, and everyone else, sit down and relax... Though, I suppose it is a little odd for me to say that.”

“You’re damn right it is. This is *my* house.”

Kozakura turned and left the bathroom, still fuming. Toriko and I followed. When I walked past Migiwa, I looked up at him.

“You were playing with the water, right?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

“You said something about borrowing towels...” I said, and Migiwa’s smile deepened.

Three days prior, Kozakura and I were abducted off the street by the agents of a brainwashed cult. They worshiped Runa Urumi, a high school girl who was able to entrance people using the special Voice that had come from the other world. They had originally planned to abduct Toriko, but there was a mix up, and they grabbed Kozakura instead.

The cultists broke into Kozakura’s house, making a second attempt to capture Toriko. But that’s where Toriko and Migiwa—who had

rushed to her side when she contacted him—were lying in wait.

Once they dispatched the attackers, Migiwa had interrogated them to learn where Kozakura and I had been taken. Though, obviously, extracting information from mad cultists wasn't going to be easy. When I asked him how he did it, Migiwa had said that he "merely borrowed the bathroom and some towels," and that they "played with the water for a bit."

"Now, I cannot claim to be experienced, but from what people tell me, when you want to get a person to tell you something, the most effective way is to use water. It makes no mess, and leaves no wounds. It also does not require any special preparation," Migiwa gently explained. He didn't have to spell it out. Even I could tell he was talking about torture. The director of the DS Research Encouragement Association, Youichirou Migiwa, who looked like a butler in his three-piece suit, was more versed in violence than you would expect just looking at him. But I knew that his forearms, hidden by the long-sleeved shirt he was wearing, were covered in Mayan tattoos.

Scary!

Still, if Migiwa hadn't efficiently extracted the information from the cultists and then rushed to our aid with Toriko, they would have shot me dead and brainwashed Kozakura. So, obviously, I was grateful, but I was still freaked out. I mean, I was just a university student, after all.

"Could you not talk about that dangerous stuff in my house?"

"Pardon me," Migiwa apologized politely when Kozakura complained.

We walked down the hallway and headed back to the reception room. The hall was covered in footprints and littered with metal wire and plastic bottles which they must have used to make traps for the intruders. A number of nails had been hammered into the walls, too. We had wrapped green masking tape around them to make them stand out more as a temporary precaution.

Back in the reception room, we sat down on the sofa. Migiwa remained standing.

"Should I put on a pot of tea?"

"Oh, please do."

"Again, why are *you* answering, Sorawo? This is *my* house. Got it?"

Though she said that, Kozakura didn't actually object to it. Migiwa made enough for everyone.

In between sips of hot green tea, Kozakura grumbled. "You all just go around, doing whatever you want to my house."

"I apologize. It was an emergency, so we had no choice... The DS Lab will pay for all of the necessary repairs."

“Glad to hear it. Can you renovate the place, too?”

“Certainly. I would like to do it in a way that is in line with your desires, so if you could—”

“It was a joke... I only need you to tidy the place up.”

“Hey, Sorawo.” Toriko, who had been quiet for a while now, looked at me hesitantly.

“What?”

“So, for the after party... What do you want to do?”

“...Huh?”

Me and Kozakura both stared at Toriko.

“Well, you know, we went to the other world and came back, didn’t we? So we’ve gotta have a party.”

Toriko was oddly fixated on going for an “after party” where we would eat and drink each time we explored the other world. It confused me at first, but it helped me feel like we’d returned to normalcy, so I thought it was a good custom for when we changed sides from the Otherside to the surface.

Kozakura’s teacup clattered as she set it down and stood up.

“Okay! I’ve got it! We’re going for meat!”

“Huh? But I don’t have that much money.”

Kozakura looked at me, and snorted. “It’s on me today—you did save me, after all.”

“You’re amazing, Kozakura.”

“You’re the best, Kozakura-san.”

Kozakura glared at us.

“Wow, you two are mercenaries... Well, whatever. Let’s go!”

“Huh? Right now? Aren’t the cleaners coming?”

“I will be here to watch the place while you are away, so please, go ahead.”

With Migiwa sending us off like that, the three of us headed out for an impromptu trip to eat meat.

It probably wouldn’t have been a good idea to leave her house completely in the hands of other people, so Kozakura needed to be able to head home in a hurry if any issues arose. That’s why we decided to look for a place in front of the nearest station, Shakujii-kouen.

“I want to eat some good meat.” That was Kozakura’s preference, and she was paying, so Toriko and I just nodded our heads and looked for a restaurant.

We entered a bar and grill that was conveniently open all day and started off with rosé wine, even though it was still bright out. I’d never thought of rosé as anything more than “that kinda pinkish sweet stuff,” but the taste of it was crisper than I had expected, and I liked it. Next, we ordered prosciutto, flame-seared meat sushi, and red

wine. We had the staff cook us some expensive meat that cost 2,000 yen per hundred grams, and devoured the steaks after watching them sizzle on a hot iron grill. I think all three of us were big eaters, but even taking that into consideration, we had extra large appetites today. After fighting the cult, then surviving an encounter with a dangerous entity from the other world, our bodies were craving the nutrition they needed to bounce back from all of that.

A dangerous entity from the other world...

I watched Toriko and Kozakura as I cut my steak. What were they thinking about? The woman they had once known and been close with had appeared before them, now transformed into a horrible monster.

That woman, who I had been catching glimpses of for a long time now, had finally shown herself in a form Toriko and Kozakura could see, too. Even with all their lingering feelings they still harbored for her, those two had to understand that she wasn't the person they once knew.

They must have given up now, right?

No... I'm not so sure.

If they were still hung up on her after seeing that monster, there was no helping them, but I couldn't let my guard down. Even though I ignored everything Toriko and Kozakura said or did when they got sentimental, I could tell that their feelings for her still ran deep.

That woman. Satsuki Uruma.

The one who had murdered Runa Urumi's mother in front of our eyes, then nearly killed Runa herself. We managed to escape back to the surface world, but neither Toriko nor Kozakura had said a word about Satsuki Uruma since.

Maybe they talked about her when I wasn't around. Even if they did, I didn't care.

Kozakura's phone started vibrating on the table.

"It sounds like the cleanup's done," Kozakura said after looking at the screen.

"That sure was fast, huh?" I remarked.

"See, I told you so. We didn't break much," Toriko quipped.

"Yeah, I know. Don't look so smug about it." Kozakura sent a reply, then knocked back her third glass of wine.

"I guess I'll head back once I finish this. I can't make him watch the house forever."

"Migiwa-san's good at looking after people, huh?"

"He makes a hefty salary, after all."

"Hey, you could just act grateful. You're such a contrarian, Kozakura."

"I don't want to hear that from *you*."

Their alcohol-fueled bickering dragged on like that, so I decided

to intervene.

“You were saying before that he gets a lot of money from the government and businesses, right?”

“His facility looks after the family of some wealthy people. He’s got to be making a hefty profit.”

The DS Lab had existed since the 1990s, and they secretly provided care to those whose bodies and minds had been warped by the influence of the Otherside. They apparently started out as a group of business executives, diet members, and researchers who were attempting to explore the other world. I was told that because they cared for victims who had been so thoroughly destroyed that there was no hope of recovery, they still received a significant amount of funding from the families. As the person in charge, Migiwa was able to live quite an elegant lifestyle.

Kozakura worked with the DS Lab, and arranged for them to purchase any artifacts we picked up in the other world. In a way, the reason we could eat this delicious meat right now was that some of that charity had come our way.

It was already evening outside. As I watched the people being spewed out of the station one after another, I caught myself unconsciously searching for that woman in the crowd.

Frowning, I looked down at the wine left in my glass. Because the phantom of Satsuki Uruma had been stalking me for a while now, I’d grown used to remaining alert. That made me upset.

“Something wrong?” Toriko asked. She must have noticed the change in my expression.

“I was thinking.”

“What about?”

“...About what happened yesterday.” Not wanting to give a straight answer, I dodged the question.

“Ohh... It was pretty awful, huh?” Toriko’s brow furrowed as she said that. It looked like she hadn’t picked up on my evasiveness this time.

Yesterday, we were at the DS Lab’s building in Tameike-Sannou. We had been called in for a job only Toriko and I could do—cleaning up after Runa’s cult.

Runa Urumi (this was apparently not her real name—Migiwa told me what it was, but I forgot it) was an obsessive fan of Satsuki Uruma, despite having never even met the woman. She used the hypnotic voice that she had gotten from the other world to brainwash people and turn them into her believers. While Runa Urumi was unconscious after being taken down by Satsuki Uruma, the cult formed by her followers still remained.

The ones that Migiwa and Toriko had captured were held prisoner

in the DS Lab's medical facility. When we entered their room, there was a bunch of men and women, all patched and bandaged up, glaring at us with unmasked hostility.

They needed Toriko and me there to undo their brainwashing. With my right eye, I could perceive the Voice coiled around the fanatics' heads like some sort of living creature. While I looked at them, Toriko would grab that Voice with her left hand, and yank it out. When she pulled that thing out through their ears, the cultists stared vacantly at us, as if they had suddenly woken up. Then their expressions, without exception, slowly turned to one of despair.

"We were lucky it wasn't genuine mind control," Kozakura commented as she stood back and watched us pull the Voice out of people one after another.

"Lucky? How is this lucky?" Toriko muttered dubiously.

The now ex-believers who had been de-Voiced all retained their memories of the time they had been brainwashed by Runa Urumi. Some wailed at the sudden sense of loss, or clutched their heads, realizing the abnormal mental state they had been in... I didn't know this for sure, but some of them had probably done unspeakable things while under her influence, maybe even cast away their friends or families. The hospital room filled with cries of despair, only growing in number as we continued. It was a disheartening sight.

"Runa Urumi's brainwashing was powerful and fast acting, but just pulling it out breaks it, so it's easy to sort out. If this was a more mundane form of brainwashing, it would take a lot more time to deprogram them. I'm saying that this is better than that, at least."

As Kozakura said that, perhaps unconsciously, she kept digging at her own ear. When she was abducted with me, Kozakura had been brainwashed with Runa Urumi's Voice, too. She might have been even more disturbed by what she was seeing here than we were.

I had some thoughts about all of this, too. I wondered if my father and grandmother, who had been driven mad by a cult after Mom's passing, could have gone back to normal if their brainwashing was broken like this. Or would the bonds of trust we lost stay severed, even after being freed from the brainwashing? Not that thinking about it would do me any good now.

By the time the Voice had been pulled out of all of them, we were completely exhausted. The DS Lab's medical staff were busily running from one ex-fanatic to the next. The doctor with the shaved head, who had recently been wounded with a nail gun, was running the show, giving orders with one arm in a sling. They were clearly shorthanded, but according to Migiwa, they would be bringing in more people soon. In fact, there were already a number of people in the building, working to repair the damage done to the furnishings and equipment

during the cultist attack. We were too tired to care, though, so we splurged on a taxi to take us back home. Maybe the reason Kozakura was so enthusiastic about eating some “good meat” today was that she wanted to burn off the stress from yesterday.

We finished eating, and headed outside while we waited for Kozakura to settle the bill.

“What are you two doing after this? Heading home?” Kozakura asked.

I looked at Toriko before answering. “We’ll stop by your place first. We still need to talk to Migiwa about what happens next.”

“Oh, yeah?” Kozakura replied curtly.

We started walking down the street, evening now having turned to night. Toriko was on my right, and Kozakura on my left. When I noticed we were all walking in a row, it felt a little weird. I wasn’t good at walking with more than two people. When there were so many of us, we blocked the road, and I worried we were getting in the way of the people behind us. That’s why I tended to walk in front of the other two.

Was it because I was walking slow? *I guess I’ll go on ahead...* I thought, then, *Nah, no need*, I reconsidered. The road wasn’t that crowded, so I didn’t need to worry about it. I was feeling a bit tipsy as I walked alongside them to the station.

It was autumn now, and there was a chill in the air. The moon floating in the still slightly blue sky shone brightly as it looked down on us.

2

Two days later, on a Saturday afternoon, Toriko and I got off the Seibu-Ikebukuro Line at Hannou Station.

When we exited through the ticket gate, a large van drove up to us. The passenger side window was open, and I could see Migiwa sitting there, so it was immediately apparent that this was our ride, here to pick us up. Remembering how my abduction had played out, though, I still tensed up a bit despite myself.

As I unconsciously backed away, the soft sensation of a palm on my arm brought me back to my senses. I looked down at it to find that, at some point, Toriko had taken my hand.

“You okay?”

“...Yeah. Thanks.”

Toriko looked closely at me as I answered, then nodded and let go of my hand.

“Please, get in,” Migiwa said, and the automatic door to the back seat slid open. There were two rows of seats that were off to the right-

hand side of the car.

There was a woman sitting in the front row of seats, and she gave us a slight nod when our eyes met. She wore little makeup, a long-sleeved shirt stuffed into her loose-fitting pants, a waterproof jacket, and thick boots.

The driver's seat was occupied by a white man who was dressed similarly. He wore a pair of thin sunglasses that looked like they were maybe designed to be used in sports, and his face was half-covered with a beard. In the passenger's seat, Migiwa wore his usual three-piece suit. We had come in our exploration attire, since it was easier to do things outdoors that way, so Migiwa looked out of place next to the rest of us in the car.

Toriko and I took our seats in the rear row, the door shut, and we drove off. Migiwa turned to talk to us.

"I am grateful that you would come all of this way. Kamikoshi-san, Nishina-san, I look forward to working with the two of you today."

"Uh, sure. Um... Who are all of these people?" I asked hesitantly. The woman in the row of seats in front of us answered.

"I'm Sasazuka of Torchlight. Nice to meet you."

"Oh, hi... I'm Kamikoshi."

"I'm Nishina."

She offered her hand, so I hesitantly took it. Her palms felt hard, and her grip was firm. The business card she handed me said "Torchlight Inc. CEO/Security Consultant/Overseas Travel Coordinator Niko Sasazuka."

"Security consultant?"

"Overseas travel coordinator?"

As Toriko and I looked at the card, cocking our heads to the side in confusion, Migiwa explained. "Torchlight is a private military corporation. When things like this happen, we need to heighten our security, which is why I brought them in."

"Private military corporation..." I felt like I had heard those words before, but it wasn't clicking right now. Were they the military equivalent of contract workers, maybe?

"Is the vehicle that's been following us with you, too?"

I looked out the rear window when Toriko said that, and... Yeah, she was right. There was another van that looked like the same model behind us. I hadn't even noticed.

"Yes. That's one of our cars."

When Sasazuka nodded, Toriko looked a little relieved.

"Isn't it hard running a PMC in Japan?" Toriko asked, and Sasazuka smiled slightly in amusement.

"It is. Because, normally, we aren't able to use guns." Her eyes

were on Toriko's backpack. It looked like she'd been told we were carrying weapons.

Well, did she know about the other world, too?

"Migiwa-san, um, just how much have you explained to them about the situation...?" When I tried to ask that without saying too much, Migiwa picked up on what I was really asking.

"Torchlight is aware of the existence of the UBL. As well as the dangers of it."

When he said that so easily, I was actually more confused. UBL—that was short for Ultrablue Landscape, the DS Lab's name for the Otherside, but... even if someone told them a world like that existed, would they just believe it without question?

"We've worked with DS for quite some time. We're aware of how things came to be the way they are. Obviously, we'll be keeping things confidential, so don't worry about that."

"So, basically... you guys are like the DS Lab's special ops team?" Toriko asked. Migiwa and Sasazuka looked at one another.

"I guess you could say it's more of a personal connection, really."

"Yes. It is hard to bring things regarding the UBL out into the open, so I turned to Torchlight, who I had personal dealings with in the past."

"Well, it's more that Migiwa-san worked with us a long time ago, before he started his current business."

Migiwa hired a PMC through his own personal connections? He used to work with them a long time ago? The more I imagined his past, the shadier it got. I felt like getting soldiers to guard us was excessive, but considering where we were going, maybe we needed to be prepared.

Because we were headed to the cult compound in the mountains of Hannou—the Farm.

3

There was one more thing Toriko and I needed to do to clean up after Runa's cult. Deal with the Farm.

This facility was built by the cult based on the famous, true ghost story *The Farm in the Mountains*.

The original story was a detailed report about an odd place in the mountains that the narrator entered. It looks like a farm at first glance, but there isn't a single cow in the barn, and there are no people at all. Between a washroom that has too many stalls, a place that looks like a lab with shattered glass all over it, and a mountainous pile of charcoal, the building itself is weird, too. The narrator makes his way into the second floor of a warehouse with no

stairs, and witnesses a tatami room littered with countless dolls that have paper talismans stuck on them, and the word “Help” written on sliding doors with paint.

The building in the mountains of Hannou that Kozakura and I had been abducted to was built using this famous ghost story as a model. The unused barn, the room with “Help” written on it, and a number of other elements had matched it closely, so I figured it out in no time. In order to get closer to Satsuki Uruma, the object of her worship, Runa had tried to contact the other world, and to do so she replicated the situation from a preexisting ghost story.

She was partially successful. It was true that she managed to open a gate, and she had a number of Fourth Kinds—people who had been altered by contact with the other world—imprisoned here. *Speak of the devil and he shall appear*. Runa’s ceremony to summon the other world actually worked—even if the result was not what Runa intended.

Even with her cult destroyed, the building was still there. It was too dangerous to just leave it. That being the case, Migiwa had asked me and Toriko to come out and take stock of the current situation at the Farm.

The van bumped up and down as we drove along the unpaved road. Bushes and branches on either side of the street scraped the vehicle. The winding road was too thin to pass another car or do a U-turn. Once we had climbed for a while, the road widened, and we came to a corner. There was a steel drum by the roadside, and the words “30 more meters” were written on it in paint.

“...They replicated this, too,” I mumbled, despite myself.

“They did what?”

“That’s something that appeared in *The Farm in the Mountains*, too.” Once I explained, Toriko looked at the drum dubiously as we passed it.

“It’s just a sign, right?”

“On its own, yes.”

As we were talking, I spotted the next drum. It said “20 more meters.”

“I didn’t notice the first time we came.”

“It was night, after all. And it was pitch-dark, too.”

When Toriko and Migiwa said that, it finally hit me. These two had climbed this twisty mountain road without any lights in order to save Kozakura and me.

The drums with signs continued past there.

“15 more meters.”

“10 more meters.”

The actual distance was far wider than what was written on them, and they weren’t at equal intervals. It looked like they hadn’t

measured at all, but put them at each corner. When the last drum—which had “Destination” written on it—appeared, my field of vision suddenly widened. There was a group of buildings in the middle of a lot surrounded by trees.

We had reached the Farm.

The ground had been leveled, then covered with gravel, similar to an unpaved parking lot, creating a plaza with buildings surrounding it on three sides. Our van came to a sudden stop just after entering the square.

“You two, wait here for a moment,” Migiwa said, then opened the door and stepped out. The driver exited the vehicle at the same time.

Sasazuka got up out of her seat and climbed out of the vehicle through the sliding door. While I watched, wondering what I should do, they opened the back of the van and started unloading some heavy-looking bags and plastic baskets containing equipment.

When I saw multiple shotguns come out of the bags, I was shocked. Hadn’t they just said they couldn’t use guns inside Japan?

The Torchlight people skillfully loaded the guns with bullets and pulled the slides. The people who had piled out of the other van were prepping their equipment, too.

Migiwa came back to the vehicle and called out to us. “I am sorry for the wait. Please, come this way, both of you.”

Toriko and I both stepped out of the van. The Torchlight members had scattered around the vehicle and were watching the surrounding area. More than half the people who had been in the other van looked foreign. Most of them were buff guys, too. The only women were Sasazuka, as well as one other woman who looked Hispanic.

“So you do have guns,” Toriko said, and Migiwa smiled weakly.

“These belonged to the cultists who attacked the DS Lab. When we questioned them about the details after you broke their brainwashing, it turned out they had acquired them through barely legal means. So, after discussing the matter, we took them off their hands.”

I see... So there are places to get guns if you need them, huh?

Sasazuka came back from talking to her people. “Migiwa-san, we’re good to go.”

Migiwa nodded. “Understood. Very well. Are the two of you ready?”

“Ah, hold on. We’ll get our guns, too.”

As we went to open our backpacks, Sasazuka stopped us.

“That’s quite all right. We’ll be protecting you this time.”

“Huh? But—”

“This is our job. Please, let us handle it.”

Toriko and I looked at one another.

“Oh, yeah? Well, okay...” Though I had my misgivings, I wasn’t up for arguing about it with a professional right now. We grudgingly stopped without opening our bags.

Once Sasazuka and Migiwa had turned around, Toriko brought her face close to mine and whispered, “I’ll bet they don’t want us amateurs swinging guns around.”

“Ohh... That makes sense.”

Yeah, pros like her and her men weren’t going to want a novice like me carrying a gun next to them. I could understand. But even though I got it, I still wasn’t amused by it.

“I may not be, but I think *you’re* pretty used to handling a gun, Toriko.”

I didn’t really mean anything by it, but Toriko, who had been furrowing her brow, her wariness plain to see, suddenly brightened up.

“Huh?! Oh, gosh. You give me way too much credit.”

Despite her saying that, I was surprised that Toriko seemed so blatantly happy to hear it.

What? Was she getting all giddy over a compliment?

Wait, had she always been this easy...?

4

With the Torchlight people now guarding us, we headed towards the Farm. It looked like a number of them would stay near the vans as lookouts. They were calling them Base, and Team B, and so on, so they were presumably going to be handling communications and backup.

Something Sasazuka told me is that the soldiers in private military contractors are called “operators.” It made me think of the people who redirect telephone calls, so it didn’t quite feel right. Their kit was light, and they wore their shirts tucked into their pants with a thin matching jumper over top. When you saw them with a shotgun, it was like some officials from the village office had armed themselves to go hunt a bear. That said, because they were all well-built and wearing sporty sunglasses and goggles, they gave off a completely different vibe. The way they moved was sharp and professional, too. It reminded me of the guys from Palehorse Battalion.

The operators communicated using a wireless intercom system. They gave me and Toriko an earpiece so that we could hear the orders and reports flying back and forth.

The building surrounding the plaza was divided into three parts. Sasazuka called the one in front of us the Residence Building, the one on the right the Factory, and the one on the left the Cattle Barn. We

started by heading to the Factory—the building Kozakura and I were initially taken to when we were abducted.

“The day after the attack on the DS Lab, we came here again and captured the remaining cultists, but it remains a possibility that there are remnants. Please, take due caution,” Migiwa said as he walked in front of us.

“Huh?! Migiwa-san, you came back after that day?!” I asked him, surprised. Toriko must not have known either, because her eyes widened.

“The day after the attack, you were super busy, right? Wasn’t it hard for you?”

“If I am to be wholly honest, it was. We could not simply abandon the cultists we captured while rescuing Kamikoshi-san, but I needed to take command at the DS Lab building, too. I quickly got my staff together, divided them between here and the building, contacted the relevant parties, and... While it is my job to do all of that, I’d been living peacefully for quite a while, so it made me break into a cold sweat.”

I felt like Migiwa was more relaxed now than when we first met him.



The Runa Urumi incident must have made it so he could pull more money out of his sponsors—was Kozakura's conjecture. The DS Lab had been a "dead organization" before now according to her, only maintaining the status quo, but now they might be coming back to life...

I wasn't exactly thrilled to hear that. I had no hostility towards Migiwa, but it would be trouble to have more unwanted people coming to the other world.

While I was thinking about all this, Toriko took my hand again, and I looked up. My eyes met hers as she walked alongside me, and she smiled. It was a shy smile, like she was trying to reassure me, and for a moment, it chased all the worries out of my head.

Wh-What? Does she want to say something?

While I was still confused, the point man of our unit entered the Factory. The rest of them pressed themselves up against the wall. The operators were alert, their guns trained on the other buildings and the trees.

"The first floor is clear."

"Roger that, we'll move forward," Sasazuka responded over the radio, then for our benefit added, "Let's go."

We entered the building. There was an open space created by knocking down the walls, large machines we didn't understand the purpose of, and wooden pallets with freight on them. A set of rusty stairs led upwards.

In the corner of the first floor, there was something like a break room with a conference table and pipe chairs. The electric kettle and the empty instant ramen cups and plastic bottles filling the trash can were so mundane they actually seemed out of place. The wall was scarred in a distinctive, horizontal stretch. That was the work of the spreader on Kozakura's shotgun.

We waited for word to come from the second floor, and then proceeded, before coming to a familiar place. It was a windowless room, with several chairs knocked over on the floor. This was the room I woke up in after they kidnapped me.

It was also the place where Toriko saved me just when I was about to get killed.

"Thanks for what you did back then, Toriko," I said, but Toriko shook her head.

"I'm just sorry we couldn't get here sooner. I let you go through something really scary."

"What else is new? You're always putting me through scary experiences."

"Well, yes, but! This time... it really was dangerous, you know?"

Toriko's voice was a little loud. "...I'm just glad you were still alive, Sorawo."

When she whispered that last part, I squeezed her hand in return.

"How does it look, Kamikoshi-san?"

"Huh?" The sudden question from Migiwa snapped me back to my senses.

"Do you see anything?"

"Oh, right."

The reason they brought me was because I could use my right eye to see if there was anything abnormal. I focused my consciousness towards my right eye as I surveyed the Factory. I did my best not to focus on any of the people, because if I happened to stare at someone with my right eye, they'd go insane.

There was nothing out of the ordinary here. None of the silvery halos that marked a point of connection with the other world, or the blue light that came from the depths of UBL.

"...It looks like this place is fine," I said, though it was a memorable spot for me.

It looked like we'd reached a dead end, so we turned back and moved on to the next building. Toriko was holding my hand the whole time.

Does her hand feel lonely without a gun in it? If so, I kind of understand.

I tried thinking about it that way, but then she gave me that strangely-gentle smile again, and I recoiled.

What's that all about...?

As we descended the stairs, we got a report from the guys outside over the radio.

"Something moved on the third floor of the Residence Building."

"What do you mean by *something*?"

There was a pause after Sasazuka's question, and then the answer came back.

"Cannot confirm. I only saw them for a moment, but someone was definitely there. I think I saw a face. They were looking our way."

We looked at one another. Migiwa raised an eyebrow, and talked to Sasazuka.

"Do you think there are still remnants?"

"It's possible. Do you think they'd accept an order to surrender?"

"If they are still under Runa Urumi's influence, I doubt it. They must have noticed us, so I do think it would be fine to try calling out to them."

...Huh?

Suddenly, I had an unpleasant realization.

"What's up, Sorawo?"

Had the fact that she was holding my hand given something away? When Toriko asked me that, I spoke up.

“Migiwa-san, the last time you came here, did you go to the basement of the Cattle Barn?”

“The place where the gate to the DS Lab was? I did go see it.”

“Were there thick metal doors along the way to the gate?”

“The jail-like area, you mean? We looked at all of the cells, but there was no one there.”

I groaned as the bad feeling I had proved to be accurate.

“Seriously? There were Fourth Kinds in there. At least two of them...”

“Oh, dear...”

While I was trying to flee with Kozakura, I entered the cell of a Fourth Kind contactee. The Fourth Kinds had likely been brainwashed by Runa’s voice, and they were controlled by the cult. As proof of that, two of them even joined the attack on the DS Lab.

“There was one especially vicious one that was left behind. If that was the ‘person’ they saw, they could be pretty dangerous.”

“Thank you for telling me, Sasazuka-san.”

Sasazuka nodded, and sent orders over the intercom. “Everyone, listen up. There is a high probability that the enemy is a vicious UBL contactee. Remain alert.”

“Roger.” The response came immediately.

We left the Factory and returned to the plaza. Our next destination was the Residence Building.

5

The Residence Building was a wide three-story structure, and glass windows lined the corridor that faced onto the plaza. It was built a lot like a school.

The squad headed towards the entrance to the first floor. Immediately on the right when we entered was a small reception window, like you might see at a hospital, and a dirty curtain blowing in the wind.

One of the operators pulled back the curtain with the end of his shotgun, then let out a grunt and came to a halt.

“What’s up?” Sasazuka asked.

“For a moment, I thought there were people... It was a photograph.”

“A photo?”

The door next to the receptionist’s window was open, and I could see inside.

The first thing that jumped out at me was two figures sitting

across a table from one another. Then, an instant later, I realized my mistake. The room was empty, with no people or even furniture. However, pasted on the opposite wall were countless photographs in the shape of a table and human figures. The photos looked like they were all of some family doing ordinary family things. The background, outfits, and heights of the people who were the subjects of the photos all looked similar, so it seemed likely that they were all of the same family. But all of the faces were blacked out, so I couldn't be sure.

"What is this...?" Migiwa murmured.

I frowned. "They're cultists. If you try to make sense of every little thing they did, we'll be at it forever."

This was probably another ritual to create a situation that felt like it came out of a ghost story and bring them close to the other world. What they were doing wasn't much different from making a haunted house, but considering their objective, it was hard to smile about it.

I was about to say "*let's hurry*" when I noticed the strange look on Migiwa's face. He wasn't looking at the photographs on the wall, but scanning the whole room, and furrowing his brow.

"Migiwa-san? Is something wrong?"

"When we came here the other day, we must have checked this building, and yet I have no recollection of seeing a wall with all these pictures on it."

"Huh...?"

Toriko and I looked at one another.

"So, basically... does that mean someone redecorated the place in between the last time you were here and today?" Toriko asked, and Migiwa cocked his head to the side.

"Does it...? No, but what was this room like last time? I can't seem to remember. I know I must have seen it."

Could it be?

I focused my right eye, and looked around the room again.

"Ugh, I just knew it," I said despite myself.

There was a thin silver haze hanging in the room. It was coming from the wall with the photos. The whole wall shone faintly, like it was hot, and a haze that was like the smoke from dry ice was flowing down to our feet.

"This place is connected to the other world! So there's something weird about the wall itself..."

"With the wall?" Migiwa narrowed his eyes, and looked like he was about to bring his face closer to it, but I stopped him.

"You shouldn't get closer. The interstitial space is leaking into this world. Toriko—"

When I looked at Toriko, her eyes were half-closed, and her lips were pursed. What a rich expression.

"I'm gonna touch it?"

"Well, yeah..."

"It's going to be okay, right?"

"I'll be looking, so please."

"Well, if you're the one asking me."

Toriko let go of my hand and removed her gloves. Sasazuka and the eyes of her men all focused on her translucent hand. Toriko awkwardly looked away, turning towards the wall and stretching her arm out. As she touched the silver mist, Toriko shuddered.

"I'm touching it now. What do I do?"

"Erm... Well, grab it, and tear it, or something."

"Aren't your directions kind of vague?"

Even as she griped, Toriko gripped the haze and shook her fist to the side. The fog tore like a paper screen, and silver sparks shot through the air. Once the silver light that only I could see dimmed, all that was left was a grimy wall with nothing special about it.

There was a single photo lying at our feet. It looked like it showed the burned-out husk of a house, but I didn't feel like looking, so I turned around and moved to the corner of the room where I'd have some distance from it.

"I always forget to bring something to wipe my hand with." Toriko shook her hand in the air, wiped it on her pants, then put her gloves back on.

"Sorry. It really is unpleasant, huh?"

"I dunno if I'd call it unpleasant... It's like nothing you've ever felt. I never know what to do with my hand after touching these things."

Even as she said that, Toriko grabbed my hand again. Though she did it with her right hand, not her left.

"Is it safe now?" Migiwa asked, and I nodded.

"This place is fine. Probably, at least."

Runa Urumi's attempt to get closer to the other world had been a success. The distasteful renovations that the cult had done to this place had brought forth an artificial interstitial space on the surface world.

If things are already like this at the entrance, we're in for a rough time...

As the unit started moving again, I felt a wave of depression.

6

I was right to be concerned.

Like I would have assumed from the outside, this building was constructed like a school, with a number of rooms lined up along a hallway. They had all been renovated bizarrely, and more than half of

them were connected to the interstitial space.

There was a room with school uniforms nailed to the wall, covered in blood. The pages of notebooks lying on the ground were turning, even though there was no wind.

One room had a mannequin standing with its back to us. Even though I definitely heard voices before we opened the door, everything went quiet when we opened it.

Another room had countless vinyl cords hanging from the ceiling. The pieces of paper tied to the ends of the cords looked like omikujī fortunes that had been tied off as a ward against bad luck.

Yet another room had a single refrigerator, letting out a low drone. When we hesitantly opened it, there was a volleyball with a face that looked like a child's scribble on it, and it was wearing a wig.

The really crazy one was the room with the rock. I don't know how they got it in there, but the massive boulder at the door was so big we couldn't get inside, and it gave off such an unsettling feeling that I wasn't interested in trying. There was another room where the floor was covered in stones; on closer inspection, they were all gravestones. The room with pure white gravel on the floor had been letting out crunching noises as if someone was walking on it before we opened the door. It was awfully misty in that room, and I couldn't make out the far wall.

Walking around all these rooms that were decorated so ominously was tiring. Toriko and I closed the gates to the interstitial space one by one.

I could tell the operators who were with us were getting sick, too. They had sudden nosebleeds, couldn't stop crying, pulled out their earpieces because of the ringing in their ears... None of them whined about it, but when I was next to them, I could easily sense their tension levels rising.

We started checking on the lower levels, and the last room we came to was on the far end of the third floor. When we closed a gate that was in a bathroom with a scorched bathtub, the echoing sound of boiling water changed to the hiss of steam. There wasn't a drop of water in the room, but the noise seemed to come from nowhere in particular, and it was hopelessly grating. With the bathroom now suddenly silent, the sound of one operator vomiting filled the room. It was a big black man who covered his mouth and rushed out into the corridor.

"This place can really get to you," Migiwa mumbled as he peered into the tub.

The scorch mark left in the bottom of the bath was shaped like a person. When I looked closely, I could see scraps of hair and flesh clinging to it. It looked almost like they had cooked someone in the

tub until the water all boiled off. It was possible that they brought in a bathtub from a building where there was an accident like that. Maybe there were awful stories behind some of the objects in other rooms, too—

The man out in the hallway must have lost control of his nausea, because I heard the sound of him retching.

“Is that guy going to be all right?” I said that without really meaning anything by it, but Sasazuka turned the question back on me.

“Are you two girls okay?”

Me and Toriko looked at one another.

“Well... I’m pretty decent, I guess?”

“Looks like I’m good, too.”

Once we replied, the fear gradually crept in. When I saw a normal person’s reaction to the other world, it occurred to me that we should have been like that, too. Were we dense? Or just used to this?

I didn’t like being used to it.

We headed out into the hall. The operator who had left before us was looking out the open window.

“Feeling better?” Sasazuka asked him, but there was no response.

Instead, the man raised one hand, and started waving it. It was as if he was giving a signal to someone outside. But this was the third floor, and only the trees that surrounded the Farm were in the direction he was waving.

“Marcus? What are you—”

It happened just as Sasazuka called out to him suspiciously.

Outside the window, someone fell.

“Wahhh?!”

I screamed and backed away despite myself. It was all over in an instant, but the image was so intense it burned itself into my retinas. It was a man in a pink shirt wearing slacks. His eyes were locked with mine as he fell, but I couldn’t picture his face. That’s because it was smushed like clay that had been slammed against the floor.

I’d seen this guy before. He was one of the Fourth Kinds they had been keeping in the Farm’s basement.

I cowered as there was a noise like the sound of a slap, only magnified ten times. Was that what it sounded like when someone fell from a high place like this...?

“Hey, Marcus?! What are you doing?! Stop!”

The operator who had been waving his hand climbed up onto the window frame, and leaned outside. Sasazuka leapt forward, trying to grab him, but with the difference in body mass, she couldn’t stop him completely.

“Let go of me... I have to go...”

As Marcus was struggling and trying to jump, the other operators

around him came and grabbed him from behind one after another. It took four of them to pull the big guy down from the ledge.

When Marcus fell to the floor, something about his eyes was clearly not sane. His pupils were fully dilated, and the tears flowed constantly.

Marcus was still trying to get back up on his feet, but Migiwa put him in a choke hold from behind. Though he struggled, Marcus's head suddenly lolled to the side, and he stopped moving. I was shocked for a moment, thinking Migiwa had killed him, but he'd probably only knocked him out.

Migiwa's eyes darted to the window. "Just now, was that the—" "It was the Fourth Kind! The one I saw the time I was abducted!" "He fell, right? Did he jump...?!"

Right after Toriko said that, it happened.

The same guy appeared outside the window, falling downwards. Then the sound of him smacking into the ground.

"What?!"

As Toriko cried out in surprise, another operator started stumbling towards the window. This time it was the Hispanic woman. Her eyes were empty, like Marcus's before her.

"Michelle!"

Just before she could reach the window, Sasazuka hugged her from behind.

In the middle of the chaos, I had a moment of realization.

This is one of those things you have to not look at!

The flying man had been doing the same sort of thing when I saw him under the Cattle Barn. Inside the small room where he was confined, he would fall from the ceiling, return to it, then fall again—repeating that over and over. He was falling from the same place repeatedly, trying to make others fall with him.

The character sees a falling ghost, and is drawn into their own death... It was a common trope in ghost stories. "The ghost who tries to take the living with him" was easy to understand, so it wasn't the type of ghost story that piqued my interest in the slightest, but that was probably what was going on here.

I saw a shadow outside the window again, so I shouted.

"You can't look at the window! Avert your eyes!"

As I shouted, I turned away myself, and crouched down where I was standing. Then, after a moment, there was the sound of another fall. The operators who were still standing, as well as Toriko, followed my example and looked down.

"What is this, Sorawo?"

"If you see him fall, he takes you with him, I think—"

While holding onto her comrade, who was trying to get closer to

the window, Sasazuka shouted into her intercom. “Base! This is Assault Team A! We have come under Fourth Kind attack. Shoot the man that’s jumping from the Residence Building!”

“The man who’s jumping—”

The confused voice on the other side of the intercom cut out for a moment.

“I see him. You want us to shoot the jumper. Do I have that right?”

“That’s right. Attack.”

“Roger.”

Sasazuka looked in our direction and said, “Stay down, and cover your heads!”

It happened immediately after that. There was the sound of repeated gunfire from outside the building, and shards of glass raining down on us as the windows shattered.

Thud! The sound of the fall was even louder than the last, and then... Silence.

The sound of continuous falling stopped, as though cut off.

The intercom buzzed.

“We hit him. No movement from the target.”

“Damn, he got me!” The female operator, who had regained her senses, groaned.

“Michelle!”

“Sorry, I’m fine now.”

With a look of relief, Sasazuka spoke into the intercom. “Base, do you have a visual on the guy who just fell?”

“I see him. He’s not moving.”

“Approach and confirm if he’s dead or alive. Go with a three-man cell. It has the ability to influence the human mind. If anyone on your team starts acting strangely, stop them immediately. If the target is still moving, shoot him until he stops.”

“Rog—”

Suddenly, the man’s voice grew tense.

“There’s another one on the roof!”

“Where?”

“Right above you, Boss!”

Right after that, there was a loud noise above us, and we reflexively looked up at the ceiling.

The thudding noise up there was footsteps. Someone was running around up on the roof. They were violent steps, like those of a child running as fast as they could, but they had enough weight and momentum to cause dust to fall from the ceiling.

Migiwa pointed the barrel of his gun at the roof and said, “I do not believe there is any way up to the roof, but—”

I hadn’t seen any ladders or stairs in any of the rooms we’d been

to yet, either. We turned our heads, following the footsteps as they ran in all directions until, suddenly, they came to a stop.

“We have contact!” one of the operators shouted as he took aim with his gun.

I had no idea when he got there, but there was someone standing at the opposite end of the hall from us.

He was a pure black shadow. Human in form, but with eyes so slanted they were almost vertical, like some sort of deformed fox. The shadow’s mouth was open as if he were laughing out loud, and the white of his teeth and the red inside his mouth seared themselves into my vision.

The guy looked at us, and shouted with a voice that sounded like it was breaking apart.

“Gohh! Nahh!”

This guy... I knew his voice! He was being kept below the Cattle Barn, like the falling man! He was the one with the number five written on his door!

“#5 kills too often.” That was what the cult said about him.

His vertical eyes were bloodshot. Our eyes met. He was looking at me.

With the voice of a howling beast, #5 said something.

“Sohhh! Woh....! Mahhn!”

The look in his eyes was more than enough to tell me that he was hostile, and meant harm.

His eyes locked on me. As I stayed crouched on the floor, #5 started running. He was pumping his arms and running full-tilt, closing the gap rapidly as I watched.

“Eek...”

He’s gonna kill me.

I cowered with instinctual fear.

“Sorawo!”

Toriko pulled my hand, and I staggered to my feet. But this was the end of the hall on the third floor. There was nowhere for us to run. If we fled into one of the rooms, we’d be trapped like rats.

Toriko hugged me tight as I panicked. Next to us, Migiwa opened fire.

I saw a splatter of blood around #5 as he charged in. Migiwa shot, pulled the slide, then shot again, firing so fast that there was almost no break in the gunshots.

Sasazuka and the other operators all started firing, too.

The sound of gunfire echoing through the hallway was deafening, but #5 charged on through the hail of bullets. With broad strides, and at incredible speed. Mere steps away, his knees finally gave out, and he pitched forward. The dark body stopped less than a meter from us.

“Woh... mahn...”

Everyone kept their barrels trained on #5 as he groaned resentfully. The groaning weakened, and I thought it might stop, but then, out of nowhere, #5 started to talk.

“Up here... In these mountains... What is it...?”

The sudden use of words with meaning we could understand made all of us freeze.

“What is... that place...?”

#5’s groaning echoed through the silent hallway.

“Something’s weird... Hey, something happened.”

#5 was mumbling.

“I told you, that mountain... is hollow.”

That was the end of it.

#5 stopped moving and speaking. It was a while before everyone was convinced he wasn’t going to get up and attack us again, but eventually they all lowered their guns.

“What... was that thing?” Toriko asked, but I simply shook my head. Then, noticing her face was super close to mine, I hurriedly moved away from her. I don’t know if it was her sweat, or if it was the soap she used, but when we were this close, I could tell just how good she smelled.

Looking down at the Fourth Kind on the floor, I thought about it.

Was this guy’s form based off of some ghost story, too? No specific motif was coming to mind. I felt like I had read a ghost story about a human who was possessed by a fox spirit, and their eyes slanted to the point they were vertical, but that might not have had anything to do with it. After all, the Fourth Kinds we had encountered so far hadn’t necessarily been tied to ghost stories that I knew.

If we had made one misstep somewhere, could Toriko or I have turned into this kind of beast? Into an unidentified monster, attacking people...?

As I listened to Sasazuka give the order to “bring a body bag,” I couldn’t tear my eyes away from #5.

7

Once we left the Residence Building, which was now clear, we reorganized ourselves. Several of the operators—including Marcus, who had almost been taken by the Falling Man—traded places with members of the backup team and returned to base.

The final building was the Cattle Barn. The cult’s surviving Fourth Kinds should have been dealt with now, but everyone was feeling tense and didn’t talk much.

On the first floor of the Cattle Barn, there were a number of

concrete enclosures divided off with wooden fences, but none of them showed any signs of use. There was a staircase in one enclosure leading up to the floor above.

The second floor resembled the Residence Building, and the rooms along the corridor had been remodeled to make them connect to the other world. There was a washroom with an absurd number of urinals, a kitchen with an abandoned mannequin torso, and a child's room with the word "HELP" written in red pen. Looking at them once more with my right eye, I was surprised to find there were no open gates. Were these early projects that were somehow less complete, or had there been plans to create something more in-depth later, maybe?

We followed the needlessly complex path down to the basement. In the dark and quiet of the underground tunnel, the slight whine of the fluorescent lights that dotted the ceiling echoed.

The cell I had been thrown into and the room where the Fourth Kinds had been detained were both empty. It would have been a problem if they weren't, though. Because Migiwa had been here before, our check went smoother than I expected it to. We didn't find any more gates after all... Maybe the Residence Building had been dedicated to contact with the other world.

But I knew the Cattle Barn held the largest gate: The Round Hole in the Basement.

In the last stall in the restroom at the T-junction in the underground passage, there was a hidden set of stairs that went deeper. Whether you descended from the men's or the ladies' toilet, they met at a common landing before going even further down. The doors at the junction were left wide open. There was a massive iron ring placed in the wide, nondescript concrete room. A film of silvery phosphorescence that was only visible to my right eye filled the inside of that ring like a bubble.

The Round Hole in the Basement—the large gate that Runa Urumi used to attack the DS Lab.

The Cattle Barn came to a dead end in this room. Because there had been no enemies here so far, I was finally able to feel a sense of relief.

"Kamikoshi-san, is this place still connected to the DS Lab?"

"I dunno... Want to try opening it?"

"If that is possible, please do so."

I turned to Toriko. "Do you mind?"

"Okay." Toriko removed her left glove and approached the Round Hole. She was used to it after doing this so many times. Her translucent hand was wrapped in phosphorescence, and when she swung it quickly, the air snapped, and another place appeared inside the ring. It was the underground parking lot at the DS Lab.

The operators who had been watching gasped.

“It’s open.”

When I turned around, Sasazuka was staring intently at the gate. “Is this directly connected? To the DS Lab building in Tameike-Sannou?”

“Looks like it. Gates that connect the surface and the Otherside all pass through the interstitial space to one degree or another, but the space is so short here that you can hardly even detect it.”

“Is that possible?”

“Runa’s cult had one Fourth Kind who seemed to be in charge of opening gates. This might only have been doable because of him.”

The Fourth Kind with the oversized head that got taken out by Satsuki Uruma in the other world. He used his whole head to open the gate, but thinking back to it now, his ability might have been like a combination of my eye and Toriko’s hand.

“This is frightening...” Sasazuka murmured. “You’re telling me a destructive cult had free access to this means of transportation? I shudder to think what they’d have done with it if they hadn’t been stopped.”

“I am sure there are a large number of people who would want this gate. Its value is beyond price. I am sure you already understand why, but please keep this quiet.”

“This is some crazy stuff you’ve gotten us caught up in. I’d be far too scared to ever tell anyone,” Sasazuka told Migiwa with a strained smile.

“How long do I need to keep this open?” Toriko asked, and Migiwa seemed to suddenly snap back to his senses.

“You can close it for now. Thank you.”

When Toriko let go, the hole snapped shut, and there was a light gust of wind.

Migiwa and Sasazuka began discussing what to do with this facility. For lack of anything better to do, Toriko and I stood close to one another, listening to them talk.

“If we can travel from the DS Lab to here, that is convenient. Though access to the outside from here is less so.”

“That’s true. Since this place is connected to your underground parking lot, if you could bring cars through the gate...”

“I cannot imagine the cult did not think of that themselves. When we came to investigate the other day, just behind this building, we saw the start of a large hole that was being dug with heavy machinery. This is merely a supposition on my part, but perhaps they meant to connect a road to this room, allowing them to ride vehicles into the Round Hole.”

“Ohh, that makes sense. Will you continue the construction?”

“I do believe that is an option. However, we need to consider how much we intend to invest in this place. It seems unquestionable that it will require regular checks, so it might prove safer to dismantle it entirely.”

Uh-oh. It'd be bad for us if they destroyed it.

As I was starting to get anxious listening to them, Toriko brought her face close to mine. That same smell as when she held me close earlier tickled my nose again, and I got all flustered.

“Are you thinking about something?”

“Uh... Kind of.”

Getting a hold of myself once more, I spoke up. “Migiwa-san. I wanted to discuss something...”

“Yes?”

“Would you give the Farm to me?”

I could feel a clear sense of confusion permeate the air.

“What do you mean... give it to you?” Migiwa’s expression was clouded with suspicion, so I hurriedly started to explain myself.

“This place can’t be handled by normal people. It seems like the boundary with the other world is thin all over the Farm. We’ve dealt with all the spots that stood out to us for now, but we could have missed some, and another gate might suddenly open up. With my eye and Toriko’s hand, we can fix those, but for someone who can’t see or touch them, it’s dangerous to be here.”

“I see...”

“I’m not asking for the deed to the land here. Oh, of course, if you’re willing to give me it, I’ll take it, but that’s not what this is about. I’m saying I’ll manage this place!”

My shrill voice echoed off the ceiling of the empty room where the Round Hole had been set up.

“It would definitely be for the best. This place is too messed up to leave it to anyone else. Hire me as a manager. Oh, and pay me a salary, too.”

Toriko was giving me a dubious look as I passionately asserted my argument.

Migiwa thought about it a while before responding. “It remains unclear at this juncture how this place is registered, so any response I give you must, by its nature, be provisional, but... I do believe it should be possible for us to outsource the job of managing the Farm to the two of you.”

“You mean it?!”

Looking closely at me as I got worked up, Migiwa asked, “For my reference, what would you intend to do as managers of this place?”

“Huh? Um, er, well. I want the money.”

“So you want to monitor the Farm as a job?”

“Uhhh, yeah, that. That’s it. Also, this building’s in contact with the interstitial space, so I was thinking we might find artifacts from the other world here, you know? I want to find and collect them. In that sense, it would be dangerous for people who can’t see them to be here, so I’d like you to let me handle it.” I babbled on with reasons I was coming up with on the fly.

Migiwa had a frown on his face. “As we were discussing earlier, the hidden value of this gate is inestimable. It is possible that people other than the cultists might come here in an attempt to gain control of it. This place is dangerous in that sense, too.”

“That just makes my case stronger. No one can use the gate better than Toriko and me. You need me here.”

Migiwa thought for a moment. “I see... You may be right. Very well. Allow me to take it into consideration.”

“Thank you so much!”

I enthusiastically thanked him, pretending not to notice the dubious look Toriko was giving me.

8

Having decided that all the threats at the Farm had been removed, we began preparing to pull out.

It was decided that a number of people would travel directly to the DS Lab through the Round Hole in the Basement. They carried the weapons and equipment we had collected from everyone, the wounded, and two body bags tied with plastic ties through the gate as Toriko held it open.

All said, about half of the operators ended up using the gate to return.

This place was in the mountains of Hannou, tens of kilometers from the urban core, so it should have been more convenient to go this way, but the operators didn’t look too happy about it. When you consider that they were being forced to use some unknown technology we didn’t understand the underlying principles of, I could see why they would be hesitant.

“Okay, do it.”

The operators on the other side of the Round Hole waved. I nodded to Toriko, who let go with her translucent hand, and the round gate snapped shut. The underground parking lot vanished. With the presence of several people and the noise around them gone, it was suddenly quiet. Immediately, Sasazuka’s cell phone rang. She answered, they exchanged a few words, and then she hung up.

“They say they’re fine over there.”

Migiwa nodded. “Then let us pull out as well.”

We left the room with the Round Hole and climbed the stairs. Returning down the meandering passages, we headed through the empty Cattle Barn to get outside. With all the bulky equipment sent through the gate, all we had to do was get in the van, and go home.

As we were watching the remaining operators pile into the two vehicles, Migiwa urged us, "Please, get in."

"Oh, no. We're going to look around a little more before heading back."

Huh? the look Toriko turned and gave me seemed to say. Migiwa furrowed his brow, too.

"Just the two of you? That is..."

"My eye's too dangerous to use properly when there are people around. I want to go around and look at the places we checked today one more time. Do you mind coming with me, Toriko?"

"...Sure. I can do that."

"You heard her. You can go on back without us. We'll be returning through the Round Hole, though, so I think we'll probably be back before you."

"...Very well. We checked the surrounding area, too, so I do not think there is any worry of other Fourth Kinds or remnants of the cult, but take care..."

"We'll be careful. Well, see you later."

Toriko and I watched the two vans drive away down the narrow road surrounded by tall grass on both sides. Once the sound of the engines faded, I let out an unconscious sigh.

"Aahh..."

Being around people was exhausting...

Toriko walked up next to me as I was feeling relieved, and slid her arm through mine. "We're finally alone, huh, Sorawo?"

"Huh?"

Toriko rested her head on my shoulder. Because she was taller than me, the position was a little forced. Basically, all of her weight was on my left arm.

"Urgh, cut it out. You're tearing my arm off."

"Tell me what you're plotting, and I'll stop."

"I don't know what you—"

"Hey, Sorawo. I may not have an eye like yours, but I can still tell you're hiding something, you know?"

...Perceptive, aren't you?

I felt like there was some resentment about me keeping quiet about being able to see Satsuki Uruma for all that time. Looking into her eyes, so close to mine as she hung off my arm, I got flustered.

"Hey, aren't you a bit close today?"

"You think? This is normal, isn't it?" Toriko brushed my doubts

aside as she let go of my arm.

No, you're definitely too close.

I felt like Toriko had been getting closer to me ever since the day Runa attacked the DS Lab. Physically, I mean. She didn't hold my hand so often before...

"Say something, Sorawo."

"Huh? Uh, sure. What?"

"So, that was a lie, right? The monitoring thing."

"It's not a lie, per se. I just didn't tell them everything."

"See, I knew it."

I turned around, and walked away with my back to her. Toriko followed me.

"Where are we going?"

"The Residence Building. I need you to lend me a hand again, though."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll touch whatever you ask me to at this point," Toriko said without any real care. I felt like she had to be mad at me after all.

In the entrance of the Residence Building, we armed ourselves by getting the guns out of our bags. The familiar weight of the Makarov helped me to finally relax a little.

"You ready, Sorawo?"

"Yeah."

"All right, follow me."

"Huh? Okay?"

Toriko stood in front of me, her gun in one hand, and opened the door to the Residence Building.

"We cleared the building earlier, so I think it's going to be okay, but don't move too far away from me."

"Right..."

I gave a half-hearted response, looking at Toriko's back, and then brought up what had been bothering me all day. "Toriko, aren't you acting kinda weird today?"

"Huh?!" Toriko turned and looked at me in surprise. "Weird? How?"

"Well, you've been getting closer to me than usual, you could say... This isn't how you usually act, right? It's like you're awfully fired up today, or like you're spinning your wheels."

"Spinning my wheels..." Toriko stiffened, at a loss for words, so I searched for something I could say to smooth things over.

"Hey, it's kinda like, I dunno. Aren't you really going out of your way to try and protect me today?"

"Huh? I'm always trying to do that... I mean, I'm more used to this than you, Sorawo... Like using guns, and all sorts of stuff..."

“Yeah, I know, but today it’s just... different from usual...”

I scratched my head and searched for the appropriate words. That odd smile, like she was watching over me... Like... a bodyguard? No. A parent? Nuh-uh...

“...Oh, I’ve got it! You’re acting like you’re my boyfriend!”

Toriko’s jaw dropped. “Like I’m your boyfriend...”

“Toriko, you’ve been acting like you’re trying to be a good escort. It felt kind of off.”

“...”

“I mean, that’s not how things are between us, right?”

“Huh...? Uh...”

Here I was, satisfied I’d found the perfect words to describe it, but in contrast Toriko looked kind of shocked.

“What’s wrong? You okay?”

“Y-Yeah. Maybe we’re... not like that, huh?”

Huh? Was she really all right?

“*Are you okay?*” I asked in English.

“*I’m okay... maybe.*”

Yeah, no, she wasn’t okay at all. She was more shaken up than I’d ever seen her. I got worried, and took one of the hands hanging limply at her sides.

“Listen, I appreciate the sentiment. But I’m fine with things staying the way they always have been. You don’t have to push yourself.”

“Like they always have been...”

“Come on. Let’s go.” I pulled Toriko by the hand.

“Ah!” Toriko looked as if she was about to fall over as she put her foot forward. I kept walking with her hand in mine, and we entered the Residence Building.

“Sorawo, when you say things should stay the same between us, um... what do you mean?” Toriko asked, sounding uneasy.

“Well, you know, Toriko, there were a lot of other people here today, so you must have been on edge, right?”

“Yeah, maybe. I’m pretty shy, so I get tense when there are a lot of people around...”

“I figured. I feel you there.” I let go of Toriko’s hand, and let out a big yawn as I walked.

“Ahhhhh. Seriously, I’m glad we’re finally alone together. It’s reassuring to have a bunch of gun-toting guys on our side, but it throws us off our game when there’s so many of them.”

“Yeah.”

“Thinking about how we were going to have to look after all of them if things got crazy was weighing on me, and... really, I think things are best when it’s just the two of us, doing whatever we want.”

I stopped in front of a particular room. It was a simple door, in about the middle of the corridor, with a frosted glass window.

The first time we saw it, there had been water droplets on the glass, and it felt chilly as we approached. The condensation had evaporated since we closed the gate, and nothing seemed out of the ordinary at all.

I opened the door, and there were a bunch of worn down old rowboats lying upside down. Earlier, the stains on the floor under the boats had looked like they were human-shaped, and creeped me out. Now, they just looked like ordinary stains.

“Toriko, could you open this gate?”

“Even though we just closed it?”

“Yeah. Please.”

With a mystified look on her face, Toriko opened the gate using her left hand, and the room filled with an air that felt moist. On the other side of the gate, I could see what looked like road signs floating in the fog.

“See? This is connected directly to the other world. Let’s go.”

“Uh, okay.”

Toriko and I passed through the gate. There was a diagonal line on the road signs, so it looked like they were prohibiting something, but the picture beneath the line looked like a drowning child, or an octopus, or something else I couldn’t identify.

“You can close it.”

“I can?”

“Yeah, I see the silver light. As long as you’re around, we should be able to come back.”

“...Got it.” Toriko released her hand, and the gate shut.

We walked a little ways, past the road signs, and the ground at our feet changed to grass. The fog cleared, and we were able to figure out where we had emerged.

“It’s a river,” Toriko murmured.

The river that ran through the other world lay in front of us. It was wide, with a gentle flow. The blurry sunlight seemed to give the surface a dull shimmer.

Turning to look behind us, the plains stretched out as far as the eye could see. I couldn’t spot any familiar landmarks. In other words, this was an area of the other world that we hadn’t been to yet.

“While we were closing the gates in the Residence Building, there were a number of them that seemed usable. Ones where the interstitial space was thin, and we could head straight to the other world. I’m excluding the rooms that were so creepy I don’t want to go anywhere near them from that, of course.”

“You never mentioned it then, though, did you?”

"I never would. This is *our* world. I'm not letting anyone else in."

Toriko's eyes widened, and she stared at me.

"...What?" I asked, unable to handle the pressure of that gaze, and Toriko's expression broke into a goofy grin.

"I love you, Sorawo."

"Oh, yeah?"

"I love you so much."

"Yeah, yeah, thanks."

I got flustered when she said that so suddenly, so my response was little more than a murmur. It was new to see Toriko throwing around a careless remark like that. I appreciated her being so easygoing, but if I took a beauty like her seriously every time she said the word "love," I wasn't going to last. In an attempt to get things back on track, I said, "W-Well... Should we head back?"

"Huh? We're done here already?"

"Yeah. We'll save the serious exploration for when we've prepared properly."

I turned back down the path we had come in order to test the next gate.

9

The gate in the back of the first floor hallway led out into a cave that was halfway up a cliff. Wooden planks clinging to the rock face continued to the left and right. It looked like we could go either way, but the path was so narrow that it would be easy to fall off if you stopped paying attention for a moment. Below were gloomy woods, and a thin, snaking path that we could make out through the branches.

The first room on the second floor led to a place that looked like an abandoned amusement park. I say that because there was a structure that looked like a Ferris wheel, but when we approached, we realized the things attached to the iron frame were large hunks of rock. The playground equipment nearby was rusted and falling to pieces, but even if it was all brand-new, it was hard to imagine how humans would have played on it.

There was an opening in the middle of a forest where what looked like scarecrows made of wooden branches stood in a line. The woods were so dark we couldn't see anything inside. In the middle of the opening, the dirt swelled up, as if something were buried there, and that spot was thick with white mushrooms that only grew there. There was an intense minty smell coming from somewhere.

There was a rocky area full of trash. The ground was covered in plastic drinking bottles and shards of plastic worn by the sun and

wind, and a bluish stone face peered over it. There was a continuous hum coming from beneath the trash. I thought it might be the whine of a small motor, or the chirping of insects, but even after digging through the trash with my shoe, I couldn't find the source of it.

I saw a public restroom like the kind you'd find in the park standing on top of a dune. I could hear the echo of what I assumed was the sound of a babbling brook being played at high volume by an Otohime noise machine, and it was resonating with wind blowing over the sand. Peering in through the door, I could see thorny moss growing out of one of the toilets in an open stall.

There was a gate with no light that went straight into a darkness that stank of mildew, too. We tried turning on a light, and it was a corridor lined with lockers on each wall. Before we could check how far it went, we felt several eyes on us from inside the lockers, and beat a hasty retreat.

There was a place with an abandoned bonfire that was just the right size, as if it had been prepared for us. It was burning in the middle of the open plains, and yet there was no one for as far as the eye could see. There were cobwebs around the fire, and piles of bones that had once belonged to some small animals I couldn't identify.

Beautiful places, mysterious spaces, and terrifying locales... We opened what looked like promising gates one after another, and glimpsed fragments of the Otherside. We were perusing potential candidates for an expedition, window shopping for unknown worlds. At a glance, hardly any of the gates seemed to be near places we knew, and they seemed to be far away from the places we had explored, but without investigating further it was impossible to say for sure. Ultimately, there were about six gates we could use. Runa Urumi's cult had been a bunch of worthless losers, but I guess you could say they did do some good work.

The last gate we tested came out at the side of a lake in the mountains. The sun was low in the sky at this point, and the sky was a beautiful gold with hints of rainbow color in it.

On the shore, where the waves silently came in, there was a lot of white driftwood scattered around, the pieces tangled around one another. As we stared at the surface of the lake together, I noticed something. When I wasn't following Toriko, or pulling her around, we were just walking side-by-side, exploring all sorts of places. It was a lot of fun. I think that's why when she started acting like she was my boyfriend (?), it felt awkward for me.

It seemed like, as we went from one place to the next in quick succession, Toriko had gone back to her usual self. Right now, she was watching the sky change color with a serene expression on her face. I stared admiringly as the wind that blew across the lake played with

her golden locks. Toriko noticed my gaze, and turned towards me.

“Whaaaaat?”

“Nah, it’s just—” I initially shook my head, but then reconsidered and said, “For me, what I want is simple. To explore the other world, that’s all. Just the two of us alone, without anyone else to get in the way. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. But how do you feel about that, Toriko?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean... you originally came to the other world to look for someone. But she’s kind of a lost cause now, right?”

The Satsuki Uruma we met in the depths of the other world had transformed into a complete monster. That Toriko had pulled away from her when she tried to take her away showed just how bad it was.

“That means you’ve lost your original goal, right? So, what reason do you have to keep entering the Otherside?” After asking the question, I was surprised with myself. This was a question I’d have been too scared to ask not long ago. For some reason, it came out easily this time.

Toriko was silent for a while. Just as I started to think, *Was that a mean question?* Toriko finally opened her mouth.

“Sorawo, you want to explore the other world with me, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I feel the same way. I want to be with you, too. I want us to go wherever that takes us, always together.”

“...That’s what you want, Toriko?”

“Yeah.” Toriko nodded. I was relieved, and suddenly feeling embarrassed. I turned away, and mumbled.

“Oh, yeah? Well, I’ll look forward to it, Toriko.”

“Me, too, Sorawo.”

I couldn’t see the look on her face, but she sounded ecstatic.

10

We headed back to the surface world before it got dark and left the Residence Building. Obviously, we didn’t want to be in a place like this after sundown. We were chatting about how we should hurry back through the Round Hole and get something to eat, and how we wanted to shower, but as we reached the door of the Cattle Barn, we came to a sudden stop.

It stinks.

The Cattle Barn hadn’t had any strong smell before, but was now filled with the stench of excrement and blood. Mixed in with them was an... animal smell, I guess you’d call it?

The odors that assaulted our nostrils were exactly what you would

expect an actual cattle barn to smell like.

We looked at each other, and pulled out our Makarovs. Cautiously approaching the entrance, I peered inside. The setting sun shone inside the Cattle Barn. There was something squirming at the border between that light and the shadows.

“...A cow?” Toriko murmured.

That was what it looked like to me, too. A calf. Lying on the floor, struggling to get to its feet. It was wet, as if it had just been born, and the surface of its body was covered in black fuzz.

It looked the same to my right eye. We kept our Makarovs trained on it as we slowly approached. Noticing us as we circled around in front of it, the calf raised its head.

“Huh...?!”

“Wha?!”

We both cried out in shock. The calf had a human face. Male, with unfocused eyes. Its head, which it raised towards us, swayed back and forth. Without uttering a single cry.

“Sorawo, what is this thing?!”

I was speechless for a while before, finally, the term slipped from my mouth. “Ku... Kudan...?!”

The cow with the head of a person—Kudan. This was a being that predated net lore, with accounts dating back as far as the Edo Period. It was a strange beast that died a few days after being born, but would prophesy in human language during that time.

It wasn’t just seeing a monster before my eyes that had left me so shaken up.

I felt like I recognized the Kudan’s face.

This face, with its hollow, lifeless eyes was...?

The Kudan opened its mouth, and spoke in a weak voice.

“The Red Person is coming.”

That’s what it sounded like.

“The Red Person is coming. Coming back. Sorawo.”

“What is he... Ah!”

Toriko’s voice raised sharply. We hadn’t taken our eyes off it for a second, but the Kudan’s form had changed. It was a woman in a black kimono, kneeling on the concrete. The old hands peeking out from her sleeves were gnarled and wrinkly. From the shoulders up, she had the head of a wagyu cow with short horns, and for some reason, of course, she seemed familiar.

“You’re a cursed woman, Sorawo.”

When the Kudan—no, the cow woman—spoke, long strands of spittle fell from her mouth, wetting the knees of her kimono. The voice was familiar, too.

“You’re a cursed woman. A seed of calamity. You take after your

mother—”

I screamed and pulled the trigger.

The gunshot echoed through the Cattle Barn. When I came to my senses, I had unloaded the whole magazine, and the slide was open.

“Sorawo! Are you okay?!” Toriko shouted, grabbing my hand. I couldn’t respond. The cow woman wasn’t there anymore, just a watery liquid, like thin blood, all over the floor.

Of course they had been familiar.

That was my father and my grandmother.

The man’s face was my dead father’s. The voice that the Cowhead spoke with was my dead grandmother’s.

File 13: Pandora in the Next Room

1

“All right, all right, all right, keep going, all right... Okay, stooooop!”

Following Natsumi Ichikawa’s directions, I lowered the AP-1 down from the truck, then breathed a sigh of relief. Unlike the other world, where I could drive it however I liked, here I had to worry about bumping into things, and it was exhausting.

Today, we took out the AP-1 that we had stored on the other side of the gate at Kozakura’s house and loaded it into a truck that Natsumi drove. I wasn’t keen on riding in a truck alone with her, who I wasn’t all that close with, so I took the train alone from Shakujii-kouen to Minami Yono in Saitama—or maybe, considering it was the closest station to my house, it was better to say I headed home.

When I stepped down from the AP-1, Natsumi got out of the driver’s seat, closed the door loudly, and came over to me. “That’s that, then. Okay, I’ll take the key now.”

“Oh, right.”

After handing her the key, I turned around. The roofless, doorless piece of farm equipment looked awfully out of place next to all the cars in the garage at Natsumi’s house—the Ichikawa Automobile Repair Shop. Natsumi, in her work clothes, was jotting down some quick notes on a form attached to a clipboard. “So, an engine replacement and a general inspection, right?”

“Yeah. I don’t know much about parts, so I’ll leave that to you.”

“You know, normally when people come to us to modify their cars, they have something specific in mind... Well, whatever. Consider it done.”

I had asked Natsumi to modify the AP-1 as compensation for resolving the incident where Sannukikano appeared at her house.

I’d bought the piece of farm equipment on an alcohol-fueled whim when we went to Ishigaki Island, and now it was my and Toriko’s trusty partner for exploring the other world. It could carry stuff and drive over uneven terrain, so it was perfect for the other world, but... Yeah, the top speed being three kilometers per hour was way too slow.

It was still convenient, though, and I’d gotten attached to it, so I was looking to change the engine for something more powerful. I

didn't know what to do about it when Akari brought us the hassle that was the Sannukikano incident, but that was how we met Natsumi, an automotive mechanic, so it worked out in the end. Getting the modification done was going to be free, too.

While I was thinking about it with a grin on my face, Natsumi gave me an uneasy look. "So, since this is how I'm thanking you for what you did, I'm generally going to be covering the expenses here, but..."

"Sorry to put you out like this."

"Let me just come out and ask: how much can we go over?"

"Huh?"

"If we just do a simple engine swap here, I think you'll have problems. A big engine'll change the balance of the machine, and that makes it easier for the suspension to break. It'll be noisier, too, so you'll definitely want to replace the muffler. You said you'd leave it to me, but how far does that go?"

"...How much extra can I afford to pay, you mean?"

"Yeah. I'm not charging you for our labor, or anything like that. This is about the cost if we need more parts than expected."

"Erm... Is that going to be tens of thousands? Hundreds of thousands?"

"Ahh, okay. If there was a 100,000, 200,000, and 500,000 yen plan, how much would you be able to pay?"

"O-One hundred thousand."

"Ah, got it. Okay then." Natsumi nodded easily. "Can you give us about two weeks? I'll contact you when it's done. See ya."

It's not free?

I must have looked awfully confused after Natsumi saw me out of the Ichikawa Automobile Repair Shop with a perfunctory goodbye.

2

But, well...

Now, now. It is what it is. It feels like she just took me for a ride, but I don't think that's necessarily true. Probably.

On the way back, I bought some pre-cooked side dishes from the supermarket for dinner, and as I started walking home under the darkening sky, I had managed to get my feeling largely under control.

Yeah, of course it would be like this. There has to be a limit on the price, even if it's compensation for what I did for her. If I just leave it to her and take no responsibility for the choices, that's got to be a headache for Natsumi. It's good that she at least told me in advance.

Yeah.

But, it's still kinda...

I dunno. Maybe because I expected it to be free, the recoil from that is hitting me especially hard. It also bugs me because when she offered me the hundred thousand, two hundred thousand, and five hundred thousand yen plan, I instinctively went with the least expensive. Sure, it's a fortune for someone like me, but this is a tool that we're going to be risking our lives with in the other world. Is it really a good idea to cheap out on it at this point? Maybe I still have a long way to go as a person...

While I was walking and thinking, I arrived at my apartment.

I lived in Room 102, the middle of three on the first floor. As I stepped into the first floor corridor, digging through my bag in search of the key, I spotted a figure under the flickering fluorescent lights. They were trying to open the door to Room 103.

Blech. I mentally stuck out my tongue in distaste. I'd never run into them before now.

Maybe I was letting it bother me too much, but running into one of the neighbors in front of my door just felt awkward. But if I stopped now, they'd know I was being overly cautious...

I slowed my steps as I continued to approach, and hoped they would hurry up and go inside. In vain, because by the time they got the door open, I had already reached my own room.

For lack of any better option, I glanced at them, meaning to nod, when I noticed something odd.

The hand my neighbor was holding the doorknob with—the thing protruding from the end of their sleeve—was awfully... flat.

Huh?! I looked up, but by that point my neighbor had already slipped through the door and vanished. The door shut quietly, and I was left alone in the dimly lit hall.

"Hmm...?" I stood there, scrutinizing the door for a while. The knob didn't turn again, and I heard no sound.

I feel like I just saw something weird...

I cocked my head to the side as I turned my own key, went inside, and closed the door.

I locked the door behind me, and put the chain on it, too. I turned on the lights as I took off my shoes, and walked through the kitchen into my room.

A familiar six-mat room, with shaded fluorescent lights.

I tossed my bag down on the bed and put the other bag from the supermarket on the table before taking off my coat and putting it on a hanger on the curtain rail. I peeled off my socks, chucked them in the washing machine, and went to wash my hands in the sink.

Turning off the water, I perked my ears up. I didn't hear a thing from next door.

"Hmm...?"

I returned to my room, sat at the low table, and pulled out the

food I had bought at the supermarket. Horse mackerel with nanban marinade, mashed tofu salad with green beans, and chestnut rice. I boiled water in my T-fal electric kettle, poured it into a bowl with a packet of instant miso soup, and started eating.

Though I was loose with my money when eating out with Toriko, most of the time, when I was on my own, I ate discounted food from the supermarket. It was damage control for my Engel's coefficient. I had a microwave, so I could reheat them, but I had gotten used to eating the side dishes cold, so a lot of the time I just ate them as is. Maybe that was just a habit from high school that stuck with me.

I finished eating in silence and went to the sink to wash the containers. I rinsed them gently, put them in the bag for plastic garbage, washed my bowl and chopsticks, laid them down to dry, turned off the water—and perked up my ears.

As I expected, I didn't hear anything.

“...”

I went back to my room, sat at my desk, opened my laptop, and checked the university website. Tomorrow was Monday, and I had lectures to attend, but I was pretty sure I had a report due, too. It sometimes felt unrealistic to me, but as university students, Toriko and I both had to put in a decent amount of study time, too.

Honestly, because we'd gotten involved with the other world, our studies, which were supposed to be our main focus, had been put under a lot of pressure. I ended up thinking that maybe I ought to just give up on them. If I did, I could make a living trading in the stuff I picked up in the other world for money.

But even though I thought about it, I didn't hate studying so much that I wanted to stop right this second, and I was paying tuition. So despite it all, I was still dragging myself to school.

I opened my partially written report and clacked away at the keyboard for a while. It was a homework assignment for Outline of Sociology II, summarizing how the “traditional” dances of Bali had been remade as performance arts for the tourism industry. I got distracted as I remembered the constant chak-chak-chak chanting in the kecak dance video we watched during the lecture.

...No, it wasn't just the kecak dance that was making it hard to focus. My mind kept going back to my neighbor's hand.

My fingers stopped and rested on the keyboard.

“...Yeah, that really was weird, huh?” I murmured and closed my eyes, trying to recall what had caught my eye for a second there.

The paper-thin wrist reaching out of their sleeve. It had a black, metallic luster to it. The way tacks were randomly nailed into it, it was too shoddy to imagine it was a prosthetic...

My eyes widened as I felt a shudder run down my spine.

No... Wait, what? What did I see?

Thinking about it now, it was strange how indistinct their clothing was. I tried to remember, but all I got was the idea that, maybe, it was kind of feminine? Even if you took my total disinterest in what kind of person lived next door to me into consideration, they'd still left way too little of an impression.

Come to think of it, in all the time I'd lived here, I'd never heard anything coming from the next room. Because this was my first time living alone in an apartment, I was doing my best to be careful about noise, so I'd noticed that my neighbor was awfully quiet. I could hear the TV, the clattering of dishes, and other stuff like that from the other neighbor in Room 101, after all.

I finished up the report, which had turned into a mess due to my lack of concentration, shut my laptop, and tried listening again.

As I expected, I didn't hear anything.

I hesitated a while, then went to the kitchen and got a cup. I pressed it up against the wall, and put my ear next to it.

I know there was no excuse for what I was doing, but if I could be sure that it was just a very quiet person living next door, that was enough. The problem was... what if it wasn't? I felt like I recognized this scenario. Like I had read an experience report where the neighbor's hand looked weird when they were opening their door...

I pressed my ear to the bottom of the cup, and held my breath.

At first, all I heard was the flow of blood inside my own ears, but as I closed my eyes and focused, I heard muffled voices.

"...no."

"Pull..."

"...who would..."

"...the wall."

Huh? I thought. Though I couldn't make out what they were saying, it sounded like there were multiple people talking.

Under the voices, I heard the sound of a hard object rubbing against something. Like a drawer being opened and closed. Gradually, the voices got clearer.

"Where did you shijira the woman?"

"In the late night field."

"We must have a penitent cow."

"We must."

"Will the day of kiumi be kujiri, perhaps?"

I didn't understand. Something was fundamentally warped, like it was a language from another world.

I had heard someone talk like this before. It was like this when the pub turned into an interstitial space, just before we wandered into Kisaragi Station.

The voices faded to the point I couldn't hear them anymore. Had they simply stopped talking? Or was the conversation continuing in quieter tones? I pressed my ear harder against the cup.

That's when it happened.

Suddenly, I heard voices, clearly, from the other side of the wall.

—*Is this the woman?*

—*It is the woman.*

—*Kamikoshi.*

—*Sorawo.*

“Eek...!”

I pulled away from the wall with such force that I landed on my backside. The cup rolled across the tatami.

In the quiet night, that noise must have echoed through the whole building. But I didn't have the presence of mind to be worrying about that.

Those words, they had clearly been spoken to me, with the speaker's mouth close to the wall.

Knock, knock.

I heard knocking.

I turned to the entrance.

The door looked white under the kitchen lights.

Knock, knock.

More knocking.

Who was it?

Nobody who was suddenly knocking on my door at this hour could possibly be here on any decent business. If it was an emergency, they'd probably raise their voice and call for me.

In other words, I shouldn't open the door for them.

I'm so glad I put the chain on... I thought, but then became intensely concerned about the mail slot.

Shoot. I really don't want them opening it and peeking in. I should have blocked it...

Sitting up cautiously, I got into a crouching position, so I could stand whenever I needed to. I reached for the bag on my bed, and, as quietly as I could, pulled the Makarov out of it. I didn't want whoever was on the other side of the door to sense me, so I stayed where I was, and waited to see what would happen.

Maybe ten minutes passed like that. I didn't sense anything more from the other side of the door, or from Room 103.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps out in the hall.

There was the jangling of keys, and then the door to one of the other rooms opened, and closed. This was followed by heavy footsteps, and the muffled sounds of a TV. It looked like the resident of Room 101 had come home.

“Whew...” I let out a sigh, and stood up.

From the sound of things, the resident of Room 101 hadn't seemed especially surprised. Though I still had no idea who (or what) knocked at my door, I could safely assume the situation outside my room wasn't *too* obviously bizarre. But I didn't plan on opening it to check.

Whoever they were, they'd spoken my name.

There was no doubt about it. The resident of Room 103, and the one that knocked on my door were influenced by the other world.

“Damn it...”

I groaned, and let out a deep sigh.

It's come this far? All the way to my house...

Having seen the gate that appeared in Kozakura's front yard and the way Toriko's room got connected to the other world, I had accepted that something like this was a possibility, but... now that it actually happened, I was still super unhappy about it.

I frowned as I looked at the door.

“...Should I block it, just for now?”

I took a roll of cloth tape from the shelf above the sink, walked over in front of the door, and taped over the newspaper slot so that it couldn't be opened.

I turned off the lights, and got up on the bed. I sat with my back to the wall with Room 101, and wrapped myself in a blanket because I felt cold.

I pointed the Makarov toward Room 103 and thought about it for a while.

What was happening on the other side of that wall?

What would happen if I opened fire here?

...Someone would call the cops, obviously...

I gave up and lowered my gun.

Here in this dark room, no matter how I stared at the wall with my right eye, I couldn't see what was on the other side.

3

“Oh, Senpai! Good morning!”

During lunch the next day, I was slurping away at a bowl of soba topped with a raw egg and mountain vegetables when Akari Seto spotted me and came over to talk.

“Morning,” I replied, unenthused, and Akari sat down across from me as though that was the normal thing to do.

“I heard from Nattsun. You asked her to customize a farming machine.”

“Ah, yeah.”

“What are you gonna use it for? Something on the Otherside?”

“You’re talking too loud...”

“Oh! Sorry!”

I hadn’t wanted to tell Akari about the other world, but between the Ninja Cats and Sannukikano, we had been through so many bizarre experiences together that we had to tell her at least a little. When she was listening to me, Toriko, and Kozakura talk, some information was guaranteed to come out. We had never taken her further than the interstitial space, though, so Akari thought that the interstitial space was the “Otherside.” And that me and Toriko were “specialists” of some sort, researching it...

I had no intention of correcting her vague and imprecise understanding. I just didn’t want to bring any people to that world that I didn’t have to. That’s why I always gave Akari and her excessive curiosity the cold shoulder, but it did nothing to discourage this kouhai of mine trying to strike up a conversation.

While I was slurping my noodles and giving half-hearted responses to whatever Akari said, I noticed her staring at my face.

“...What?”

When our eyes met, Akari leaned across the table. Without taking her eyes off me as I unconsciously recoiled, Akari said, “Umm, Senpai, aren’t you a little worn out?”

“You... You think?”

“You’ve got bags under your eyes. Have you been sleeping properly?”

I shook my head. “I haven’t been sleeping. At all.”

The fact was, I didn’t get a wink of sleep last night until it was bright out. When 5:00 came around, and there was light outside my drawn curtains, I suddenly relaxed, and was able to collapse into bed. Though I was able to sleep in the few hours before third and fourth period, unlike with a normal all-nighter, I had spent the time on edge, holding a gun, so it was incredibly exhausting. I had been in a rush when I left the house, too, so my face must have looked just awful.

My response made Akari’s face darken. “That’s not good, Senpai. You may be busy, but you need to sleep at night.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. I would if I could... I had an uninvited guest last night, so, yeah...”

“Huh? Was it the big C?”

The big C? I was perplexed for a moment, then laughed a bit. In some ways, maybe a paranormal phenomenon that you encountered at home was a lot like a cockroach. It doesn’t understand what you say, and there’s no telling what it might do. Even when you can’t see it anymore, you can’t feel safe until you’ve dispatched it, so you’re constantly on edge. Now that I thought about it, they were the same.

“No, no. It’s not a bug.”

“Huh? Then... Was it someone suspicious? A stalker?!” Akari continued with gusto. “Um, if you’d like, I could come over! I do karate!”

“...Thanks, but no thanks.”

The closest thing I’ve ever met to a stalker is you, always following me around. Oh, but... I reconsidered a little.

Maybe I was being too cold to Akari. Like Toriko had said before, Akari was the one and only kouhai that looked up to me. Setting aside the other world for a moment, maybe I ought to treat her a little more kindly.

I don’t know how she interpreted my silence, but the look on Akari’s face got more and more worried. Pulling back, as if she had suddenly calmed down, she asked, “Are you really all right, Senpai? If it’s better that I not ask, I won’t pry too much, but... Um, my place is nearby. Why don’t you come stay the night?”

“Huh?” I was dumbstruck by the unexpected offer. “Stay at your place?”

“It’s an ordinary one-room apartment, so it’s small, but if you don’t mind that...”

I was experiencing something akin to culture shock.

Oh... There are people who can invite others to stay over so easily. It never occurred to me. My home is my territory, and I’d never want to let anyone stay there.

“Um, Senpai?”

“Huh? Yeah.”

“Will you come? To my place?”

Should I have been grateful for the offer?

Still, I couldn’t let her dote on me so easily. I couldn’t relax if I was staying at someone else’s place anyway. And she was my kouhai...

I shook my head. “I’m fine. Thanks.”

“You are? But...”

“Sorry, I need to get going.”

I wanted to stop by the library before fifth and sixth period, so I got up out of my seat. As I took my tray to the return window, Akari called after me.

“I mean it, Senpai! You can come any time! Don’t hesitate to ask!”

4

When fifth and sixth period’s lectures were finished, I left the university. There was a time when I would have gone to work part-time at a convenience store after this. Now that I was making money off the other world, I didn’t have to anymore. I had been thinking things had gotten easier, but now that my own apartment wasn’t safe

ground anymore, it hurt not to have a place outside where I could distract myself. It was tough not being able to relax at home. I was this exhausted after just one night, so what happened last evening must have hit me pretty hard.

It was too late to go explore the other world, and I'd heard Toriko was busy this week. Because of all the school she'd skipped, she had a whole bunch of stuff piled up that she needed to take care of. Knowing that a seemingly flawless beauty like Toriko could be so sloppy helped me relax a little. I smiled a little, knowing she was having her own problems with reports and such, too. *Keep at it, Toriko.*

No, forget Toriko for now. I needed to figure out what I was going to do.

On the ten-minute walk home, my feet felt heavy.

I don't like this. I don't wanna go home...

To be a bit more precise, I wanted to go home, but I didn't like the room next to mine.

Should I just go on the offensive? But how? Pull my gun and raid the place?

"No, no, no...."

I shook my head. There was no way I could do that. No matter what it was that was living next door, even if I was able to take it down using my right eye and Makarov, the gunshots were guaranteed to result in a police report.

If I couldn't use the gun, should I actually have Akari come? Make her go berserk using my right eye, and sic the karate monster on them?

That was clearly way too inhumane. I wasn't that far gone.

Could I talk to the DS Lab about it and have them send someone over? Like the operators from Torchlight?

No, I might do it if I was seriously out of other options, but I wasn't keen on the idea at all. I wanted to keep my relationship with the DS Lab strictly business. They weren't a group I could just call up whenever I had a personal problem, and, to be frank, I don't think there was anyone who was more of a "specialist" than me and Toriko when it came to matters involving the other world.

"Oh, geez. I don't like this..."

It was weighing on me, but I really did have to handle this myself somehow. When you live alone, and there's a cockroach in your room, you need to kill it yourself.

When I reached the apartment, I cautiously peeked into the first floor corridor.

There was no one there.

I stood in front of my door, glaring at Room 103.

I dunno, but are you there? Invading my safe space. I'll show you...

I went inside my room and instantly locked and chained the door. I walked across the tatami with heavy footsteps, laid down my bag, and glared at Room 103 with my arms crossed.

Okay, now how am I going to deal with you?

I think I ended up on the back foot yesterday because I was doing sneaky stuff like eavesdropping. This is just my personal opinion, but paranormal phenomena are a lot like malicious people. The moment you take a passive posture, they come at you. In order to avoid being at their mercy, you have to go on the offensive. If you wait for them to make their move, you're playing into their hands. You have to take the initiative.

"But I still can't use the gun..."

If I couldn't shoot, maybe I should try a more peaceful method? Like banging on the wall? If I slapped the wall hard with my bare hand, what response would I get?

Yeah, that's it. I'll treat them like a really, really bad neighbor.

The more I thought about it, the funnier it was.

"Okay..."

I dramatically raised my hand, then slammed it against the wall I shared with Room 103.

Bam!

"Wah!"

I was surprised by the sound being louder than I expected.

No, was this really the time to get startled? I got back on track, and raised my hand again.

Bam, bam, bam! I repeatedly smacked the wall. It felt kind of refreshing. I'm sure the whole building could hear me, but it was still noon, so they'd have to deal with it. I was serious about this.

My hand was starting to sting, so I stopped banging and listened.

I couldn't hear a thing. Were they pretending not to be home?

Okay. I'll go knock on their door then. It was my turn to go and do what the three middle-aged women did.

I turned around to go outside, getting weirdly worked up about this.

That's when it happened.

Ding, dong.

The doorbell rang.

I froze.

Ding... Dong...

It rang again. This time, the gap in the middle was awfully long.

I pulled my Makarov out of my bag. I knew I couldn't shoot. It was like a protective charm.

I took a deep breath, and looked up.

Okay. I'm not going to let this scare me. This is my house.

Having made up my mind, I moved into action. I crept through the kitchen and stood in front of the door.

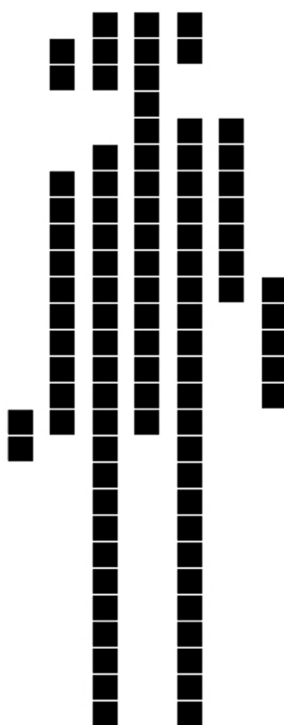
If I thought about it with a clear head, it was possible this was all a misunderstanding on my part. Room 103 was definitely turning into an interstitial space yesterday, but it was possible that a normal person lived there usually. Their awful neighbor (me) had suddenly started banging on the wall, so they'd gotten mad and come to protest. Huh? That was sounding increasingly likely.

Yeah, I've been letting the blood rush to my head. Calm down a little.

I slowly brought my eye to the peephole in my door.

The scenery outside was dyed in tones of twilight in the fish lens view.

There was a tall, red person.



The next thing I knew, I was lying on the kitchen floor, leaning against the fridge.

“Huh...?”

I blinked, and sat up. My head hurt. I hadn’t hit it. The pain was in the back of my neck, like the times when I overused my eye.

I touched my face and it was wet, so I thought I was injured, and freaked out a bit. It wasn’t blood. It was tears. My right eye was leaking a copious amount of tears, running all the way down my neck to stain my shirt as far as my chest.

I looked at the clock. It was close to 6:00 PM. That meant I’d been out for close to an hour.

This is... bad. I’m getting nowhere.

No matter what it was I was facing, it was too dangerous for me to try and go it alone.

I cautiously stood up, washed my face in the sink, pulled out my phone, and chose one of the few contacts I had listed to call.

“...Um, err, Akari? Sorry to call all of a sudden. Umm... So, you know how you were saying I should stay at your place today? Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Hey, is that offer still valid...?”

5

“Senpai! I’m glad you came!”

When Akari greeted me at the door, I was relieved to see that she looked as happy as she said she was.

She was wearing a T-shirt and striped shorts. She had removed her makeup, and was clearly in relaxation mode. I know I’d come to take her up on her offer, but was it really okay?

“I’m really sorry about this.”

“Don’t be! Please, come on in!”

Akari’s place was about a fifteen-minute walk from mine, on the first floor of an apartment building that was close to the Ichikawa Automobile Repair Shop. Come to think of it, she did say that she and Natsumi were childhood friends.

I entered the room. It had about the same layout as mine, but the building was newer. The number of shoes at the entrance and how girly they were made an impression on me.

“I thought you were one of the locals. Don’t you live with your folks?”

“That’s how it was at first, but when my family had to move away for work, I was the only one who stayed. It was easy going to a local university, and I wanted to keep taking lessons with the same sensei that I’ve been learning karate from since primary school.”

“My room is the same, but aren’t you scared, living on the first floor of an apartment building? From a crime perspective.”

“Yeah, I really shouldn’t have. Just look at what happened.”

I looked at where Akari was pointing, and the lower half of her window had countless thin scratch marks in it.

“Is that...?”

“The Ninja Cats scratched it up. It really convinced me I should have gotten a room on the second floor.”

Come to think of it, I recognized the pattern on the curtains, and the placement of the television, too. They had appeared in the pictures that Akari sent me during the Ninja Cats incident.

“Oh, right... I brought you something.”

Taking the two convenience store bags I offered, Akari cried out. “Oh, no way! You shouldn’t have! Thank you so much!”

“No, it’s nothing special...”

It really was nothing special. Just some bottles of tea, a bag of potato chips, and stuff like that. I had enough social awareness to know I shouldn’t show up empty-handed, but I had no clue what I should bring, so I just bought some stuff that seemed like reasonably safe choices at the convenience store. But thinking back, whenever Akari came to Kozakura’s house, she’d bought youkan jelly, dorayaki, and other proper souvenir sweets. It was clear that Akari was more social than I was. I started to feel embarrassed. Potato chips? What was I thinking? Was I a primary schooler going over to a friend’s house? Maybe it would have been better if I showed up empty-handed?

While I was thinking that, Akari smiled. “You know, this is fun, it takes me back to primary school, seeing stuff like this.”

Urgh... That remark hurt, even if I knew she didn’t mean anything bad by it.

Akari told me to have a seat, and headed into the kitchen. I recomposed myself, and sat at the low table. It was small and round. Way cuter than mine. Akari soon followed with dishes, and served the tea and chips.

“Here you go, Senpai.”

“Oh, thanks. Don’t mind me,” I said, but this was stuff I’d bought, so I crunched away without a second thought.

“Do you mind if I ask what happened?”

“Oh, I just didn’t want to be in the house anymore.”

“Because of personal drama? Or was it...?” There was a sparkle in Akari’s eyes as she asked concerned questions. She must have been interested to know if the trouble was something to do with my “specialty.”

Oh, what the heck. I could throw her a bone once in a while. I

owed her one for letting me stay the night, after all.

"I ended up in a situation similar to your Ninja Cats, and was wondering what to do."

"I knew it! Well, let me help you out! I'll knock the stuffing out of them!"

Akari got just as fired up as I'd expected, so I raised a hand to calm her down. "Settle down. I don't want you going wild at my house."

"Oh, you don't...? But..."

"I know you're strong. But if you get carried away and put holes in the walls, I'll never get my deposit back. You go too far sometimes when the blood rushes to your head, right?"

"Huh? Do I?"

Well, that was my fault for looking at her with my right eye...

I looked around the room, not sure what else I should talk about to the now slightly-disappointed Akari. There was a bed, a small bookshelf, and one of those cheap, easily assembled shelves made of plywood. The room was made up of the same things as mine, but for some reason it felt different. Was it the difference in the number of cosmetic products?

While I was looking around, my stomach grumbled.

"Senpai, have you eaten?"

Come to think of it, I hadn't eaten since lunch. "No..."

"Well, that's perfect, then. I'll make something."

"Huh?! I couldn't make you do that."

"No, no, it's no trouble. I haven't eaten yet, either! I was just making rice, too!"

If she was going to say that, I'd feel bad refusing. While I mumbled my thanks, Akari went and got some ingredients out of the fridge, then set to work cooking.

She cooks for herself. That's so impressive...

I was assaulted by the sound of vegetables and meat sizzling in the frying pan, along with the aroma of sesame oil. Once I became aware of them, I only got hungrier. While I was waiting with nothing to do, Akari's smartphone, which she had left out on her desk, started to ring.

"Your phone's ringing."

"Could you see who it is?"

I stood up and looked at the top of the desk. The caller ID read "Natsumi Ichikawa."

"It says it's from Ichikawa-san."

"Could you answer it then? My hands are full right now."

"Wha? Well, okay." I picked up the still ringing phone, and pressed the answer call button.

“Hello, this is Seto’s representative.”

“Huh? Who’re you?”

The voice on the other end of the line sounded suspicious. Was this anything to be so combative about, right out the gate?

“It’s me. Sorawo Kamikoshi.”

“Huh? Kamikoshi-senpai? What are you answering Akari’s phone for?”

“I’m over at her place now. She’s letting me stay the night, so—”

“Huh?!”

“Senpai, could you put her on speaker phone?”

I did as she asked, and without stopping cooking, Akari raised her voice to say, “Nattsun! Senpai came over to play! Do you want to come for dinner, too?”

“I’m coming!!” Natsumi shouted and hung up.

As I was wondering what the heck that was about, the doorbell rang about three minutes later. Because of what had happened at my place, I was cautious for a moment, but Akari cheerily said “Comiiiiing,” and then opened the door. A winded Natsumi Ichikawa took off her sandals as if she was used to it, and strode into the room.

“What’re you doing in Akari’s room?”

“What am I doing? I—”

Before I could answer, Akari interrupted. “I invited her.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. Senpai’s having some trouble, and can’t go home right now, so I asked her to stay with me.”

“...Is that it, Kamikoshi-senpai?”

“That’s what happened, nothing more to it than that.”

“...Oh, yeah?”

Natsumi plopped herself down. She wasn’t wearing her work clothes from the factory, but a track suit with a flashy red T-shirt inside. She rubbed her hair, which was dyed red except at the roots, and with an unamused look on her face she asked, “You’re gonna stay the night?”

“I was planning on it.”

“Oh, yeah?”

What’s with her?

Akari brought the fried meat and vegetables over. There was a pot of miso soup on the gas burner. “Nattsun, help.”

“Sure.”

Natsumi obediently stood up and went to get the dishes.

“Um, Senpai, you’re going to have to use disposable chopsticks.”

“Not a problem.”

“Sorry. I should have prepared enough sets for guests.”

With the main dish, a side dish (sliced daikon radish which she

got from the fridge), miso soup, and fresh cooked rice all laid out on the table in front of me, this was more of a proper meal than I'd expected.

The dishes I was using were totally different from Akari and Natsumi's, clearly a makeshift solution, but that was no impediment to the taste.

"You're a good cook, huh, Akari?" I said.

"Nah, all I did was fry some stuff."

"But it tastes good, Akari," Natsumi agreed.

"Hey now, it's embarrassing when you both praise me like that." Akari acted bashful. Meanwhile, Natsumi gave me a look filled with pride for some reason.

What is this?

"Oh, right. Ichikawa-san, I wanted to talk to you about the additional expenses for the AP-1."

"Yeah. What's up?"

"I know I said a hundred thousand on the spur of the moment, but what can I assume I'll get for that much? I don't know the market at all."

"Oh, it'll be fine. I didn't say that because I'm trying to shake you down for extra. It's just that I haven't messed around with an agricultural machine before, so to be honest, there's a bit of figuring it out as I go along. It should be cheaper than normal car parts, but if we have to pay too much out of pocket, it's going to be difficult for us to do, so I just wanted to know how much you were able to pitch in."

"I understand. If it looks like it's going to run over that, let me know. I'll consider it."

"Gotcha. Can I ask something, too? Where're you planning to drive that thing? Not on the roads, obviously."

"Yeah, it's uneven ground. There are bumps, mud, and more."

"You'll want it set up for off-road, then. Gotcha."

Natsumi knew even less about the other world than Akari, so she probably thought I was going to be driving it in the mountains, or along the beach somewhere. I must've looked like a real weirdo.

While I was thinking about that, Akari turned and gave me a meaningful look. She probably meant to say something like, *See, I'm keeping quiet about the other world*, but obviously Natsumi noticed the look, and glared at me.

"What, Akari? Is something up?"

"Nah, it's nothing."

"No way. You were about to say something."

"It's nothing, okay?"

I really didn't want to end up getting caught in the middle of an argument, so I loudly clapped my hands. "Thanks for the meal."

“Oh! You’re more than welcome!”

“What should I do with the dishes?”

“Just leave them there. You’re the guest, Senpai.”

“Thanks. I know I’m already imposing on you, but I had one more request. Would you mind if I used the shower? I brought a towel and everything else I need.”

“Sure! You go right ahead!”

I brought the bag with my overnight kit and fled into the bathroom. Unlike in my apartment, Akari’s had a separate bath and toilet. I was kind of jealous. This beat the hell out of the modular bathroom at my place.

I quickly stripped out of my clothes and used the shower. Even if it was in someone else’s bathroom, I felt relieved to be alone. It seemed like Natsumi was jealous seeing me get closer to her childhood friend, but that was just a nuisance to me. If they were going to fight, or make up, I wanted them to do it while I wasn’t there. *Please, just don’t get me involved.*

Once I showered, got changed into a T-shirt and shorts to sleep in, and headed back, the dishes had been cleared away, and futons were laid out on the floor. Akari and Natsumi were sitting cross-legged on the futons, and seemed to be getting along. They were closer than before, so it looked like they’d decided to make up rather than get into a fight.

“Thanks for letting me use the bathroom. And you even got a futon out for me. Sorry for all the trouble.”

“Nahhh. You looked like you didn’t get enough sleep, so I figured you’d want to turn in for the night early.”

“Huh? But it’s still only 10:00. Won’t I be in the way, sleeping on the floor?”

“Oh, not at all. You take the bed, Senpai. Nattsun and I are going to sleep on the futons here.”

“Huh? You’re sure?”

“Of course!”

Natsumi looked up at me, as if to say, *You got a problem?* Seriously, what was with her?

“Oh, yeah...? Well, I’ll take you up on that, then...”

This was getting to be a hassle, so I decided to just gratefully accept that she wanted me to use the bed.

It looked like she’d changed the sheets, so it felt nice. I dived under the covers, turned my back to them, and was out like a light before the lights were even turned out.

Akari and Natsumi’s whispers behind me, and their happy giggling, followed me all the way into my dreams.



6

“...Ah, Kozakura-san. Um, I have a request. Huh? No. It’s not money. It’s not, okay? Please, just listen. Um... Could you put me up for the night?”

7

“H... Hey.”

The Kozakura who met me at the door had an even more sour look on her face than usual. “I’m not running a bed and breakfast here.”

“I’m sorry. Really.”

“You said you’re in a tight spot, so I’ll make a special exception, Sorawo-chan.”

“I’m really sorry.” I kept bowing my head apologetically as I entered Kozakura’s house.

“Let me be clear, I’m not going to do anything special to look after you.”

“That’s absolutely fine. If you have a bed for me to sleep in, and I can use the bath, that’s good enough.”

I left Akari’s place after just one night. Though Akari herself seemed fine with it, Natsumi was acting blatantly wary of me, and I couldn’t convince myself to stay there any longer. The place was an odd hybrid of hospitality and awkwardness.

Besides, I didn’t want to force the owner of a one-room apartment to sleep on the floor of her own home for days on end. I was sleep deprived yesterday, so I went out like a light in no time, but if it weren’t for that, I’d have felt so restless I couldn’t sleep. On that point, Kozakura’s house had several rooms, so even if I asked her to put me up until the situation was resolved... it was fine, right? I seemed to recall her asking me to stay the night once before when she was afraid of being alone, too.

“But where am I going to have you sleep? My room only has one bed.” Kozakura groaned, a troubled look on her face.

“Oh, I’m fine on the couch, or wherever.”

“Sleeping on a sofa wears it out quickly, you know?”

“I can even sleep on the floor.”

“If you’re fine with that, I guess that’s okay.”

I decided to go with pizza for dinner. On me. I figured that rather than do a bad job choosing a gift to bring, she’d be happier if I ordered take-out for us. That plan was right on the money. Kozakura

was in a reasonably good mood as she chowed down on the limited-time, just for autumn, four-cheese pizza that I had ordered.

It was my first time setting foot in Kozakura's combined dining room and kitchen. There was a large, plain wooden table, and four chairs. We sat across from each other, and shared the crispy crust pizza with hot cheese, eating it with our bare hands.

"I never expected to be entertaining a guest here," Kozakura mumbled to herself, sounding emotional.

Having a combined dining room and kitchen was cool, but there wasn't much inside it other than a large refrigerator, so the room felt desolate. A number of garbage bags stuffed full of empty plastic cola bottles were piled up in the corner.

"I guess this is too much, huh?"

"Yeah... This house has too much space for just one person."

"Huh? Oh, no, I was talking about the pizza. I ordered two larges. That was kind of overkill, huh?"

Kozakura glared at me. "You're a real piece of work."

"Why?!"

"Oh, shut up. Just eat and go to sleep already."

"It's not even 9:00 yet!"

"Children go to bed early."

"I'm in university! I mean, I have some reports to work on, too..."

Kozakura raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Hmm, you're actually taking your studies seriously, huh? You can stay up, then."

"Well, thanks," I said grudgingly.

"How is university these days? I hear it can be pretty tough," Kozakura suddenly asked, licking tomato sauce from her dirty fingers.

"Well, I think it's pretty tough. The affluent kids can live off an allowance from their parents, but the rest of us have to work part-time to make ends meet. And it's not like we get any longer on our deadlines than they do."

"You work part-time, too, Sorawo-chan?"

"I used to. I was working a convenience store job. Things are a lot easier now that I don't have to anymore. I have you to thank for that."

"Hrmm..." I was trying to talk her up, but Kozakura frowned.

"Well... if that means that makes it so you can focus on your studies better, I guess it's fine."

"But, to be honest, I've been thinking that maybe I could just give up on university."

"Huh?"

"I went because I was interested in folklore, and anthropology, and that sort of stuff, but if I can explore the other world, that's enough for me. I can live off the money I make selling the stuff I find over the—"

“Don’t do that.”

“Huh?” I was half-joking, so it caught me by surprise when Kozakura cut me off using a strong tone of voice.

The look in her eyes was more stern than usual. “If you give up your lingering ties to this world like that, you really won’t be able to come back anymore.”

“No, that’s—”

“When you’re on the brink of life and death, being attached to the idea of coming home alive can make all the difference. If you have a person you’re close with, they can act as an anchor, but both you and Toriko are more strongly attached to the Otherside than you are to this one. If you give up on your life here, the two of you are both going to go missing.”

Kozakura lowered her eyes, struggling to continue. “I wish I could be your anchor, but I know that’s not going to happen. So, please, at least take care of your daily life.”

“...”

Kozakura raised her head and glared at me. “Have I made myself clear?!”

“Ye... Yes.”

“Well, good then,” Kozakura mumbled, then tore into her pizza with a disgruntled look on her face. It was the first time she had ever scolded me like this, so I was taken aback.

But, well... it was true that I didn’t want to do anything that was going to lower my odds of survival.

“I’ll try not to cut classes.”

“You do that.”

“As much as I can.”

“Do things properly. Live a diligent life.”

I looked around the threadbare kitchen, mystified. It wasn’t like she was living a proper life herself...

Still, I had the good sense not to say that out loud.

Once she finished eating, Kozakura withdrew to her room, and I decided to take an early bath. Her bathroom had retro-style tiling and maintained sensibilities of the era in which this house was built. The ’70s, maybe? No trace remained of the cult’s attack. The shower and faucet had been replaced with new models, making them, along with the brands of shampoo here, feel out of place in the room’s Showa Era aesthetic.

While soaking in the tub for the first time in a long time, I stared up at the wave-like patterns in the plaster on the ceiling. I liked being alone, but maybe if I lived in a house this big, I’d think it was too big for one person, too. I mean, she basically only used the second floor as a storage area.

I got out of the bath and took up a seat in the dining room. While I was there, using the laptop I had brought with me to work on homework, Kozakura poked her head in.

“Sorawo-chan, are you going to sleep soon?”

“Oh, sure. In a little while.”

“You can use the bedroom.”

“Huh? But...”

“I’m going to be working until morning. I’ll take my turn sleeping once you head out.”

“You’re sure? Okay, I’ll use it then.”

“Oh, and don’t wet the bed.”

“Who do you take me for?”

Kozakura had a big bed. Queen size? I guess that’s what you’d have called it. I could roll over twice and not fall out. I hadn’t been in a bed this big since the resort on Ishigaki Island. The sheets hadn’t been changed, so they smelled like Kozakura.

I lazed around for a bit, watching videos on my phone. It was quiet, so I started getting sleepy pretty quickly. I was out cold before midnight rolled around.

When I woke up, I was sleeping on my side, and I noticed that my back felt awfully warm. I twisted my neck around to look, and there was Kozakura clinging to me, breathing softly in her sleep.

Huh...?

I stiffened at the unexpected sight.

What is she doing...?

“Um... Kozakura-san?”

“Ah!” When I called her name, Kozakura sat bolt upright, and looked around the room restlessly.

“Wh-What happened?” I asked hesitantly, and Kozakura’s head snapped around to face me.

“Sorawo-chan, please!”

“Y-Yes?”

“I’m begging you! Could you not bring weird things into my house?!”

“Huh?”

Once I got the story out of Kozakura, who was scared nearly to death, it turned out that some stuff had happened after I went to sleep.

According to her, as she was working late into the night, she heard the sound of footsteps circling the house, and the infrared sensor on the lights at the front door got triggered several times. She checked the camera to see what was going on out there, but there was nobody around. When she worked up the courage to go check that the door was locked, the whole house started to rattle. Soon, she heard

whispers from the second floor, which was supposed to be empty.

At this point, Kozakura apparently picked up on the fact that whatever she was dealing with wasn't human. She got super scared, and couldn't handle it alone. She fled to the bed where I was sleeping, and as she was trembling, she passed out...

"This is definitely your fault, right?! And you didn't wake up when I came in here! You were just snoring away, without a care in the world!"

"I-It's okay now. I mean, it's already morning."

"It wasn't okay at night!"

"C-Calm down..."

"You think I can calm down, you idiot?!"

"...Huh? Did you hear something just now?"

"Don't try to change the subject!"

"No, I mean it, I—"

That's when the door suddenly opened.

"Eeek!" Kozakura screamed and jumped on top of me.

I looked at the door in surprise, and... there was Toriko. When she saw us in bed, Kozakura clinging to me, her eyes widened.

"...What are you two doing?"

I felt weak with relief. "Toriko... Whew, you scared me."

"Huh? Toriko...?" Kozakura separated herself from me, completely burned out, and collapsed on top of the sheets.

"Do... Don't scare me like that, you idiot..."

"Hey, what were you two doing?"

"We weren't doing anything. Hold on, I'm absolutely sure that the door was locked this time. How did you get in here?"

"I have a key."

"Why?!"

"Toriko, why are you here, in Kozakura's house, first thing in the morning?"

"Akari told me."

"Huh?"

"You had some trouble at home, right? You stayed at Akari's the day before yesterday, and Kozakura's yesterday... I heard all about it." She spoke in a flat tone of voice that I hadn't heard from her often.

"Y-Yeah."

"Hey. Why is it that I'm the only one you didn't tell?" Toriko asked in a low voice.

It looked like Toriko was pretty angry with me.

“...”

“You told me you were busy this week, Toriko. I was trying not to get in the way.”

“...”

“Come on, I wasn’t trying to hide it or anything.”

“...”

The train sped along as Toriko refused to respond. It was 10:00 AM, and though the morning rush was over, the express train on the Seibu-Ikebukuro Line was still crowded, so Toriko and I had both been pressed into the area next to the doors. I was keeping my voice low out of consideration for those around us, but Toriko kept looking upwards, pretending she couldn’t hear me. Her eyes remained permanently fixated on a hanging advertisement for a three-day, two-night hot springs trip to Chichibu and Nagatoro.

Ugh, she can be such a pain in the butt...

After Toriko showed up, Kozakura had thrown us out of her house, angrily demanding we not get her involved. Things were still feeling awkward between us when we boarded the train at Shakuji-kouen Station. I was on the Saiky Line, and Toriko was on the Yamanote Line, so we were together as far as Ikebukuro, as per usual. Still, this was the first time I’d seen Toriko in such a bad mood. I didn’t know what I was supposed to say to her.

When someone was as beautiful as her, it was intimidating to see an upset look on their face. Even for someone like me, who had gotten used to her beauty, it was scary. No, that’s a lie. I wasn’t used to it at all. With her beauty, she looked good no matter what she was doing, and she always managed to steal my attention.

Okay, I felt bad for making her feel left out, but... was that any reason to burst into another person’s house? And first thing in the morning, too...?

“I had troubles of my own to worry about, okay? There’s something crazy going on in the room next to mine. It’s like it’s the other world, or the interstitial space in there.”

When I whispered that, Toriko finally turned to look at me.

“Well, that’s even more reason that you really should have come straight to me for advice then, isn’t it? If there’s a gate there, my hand might be able to solve the problem easily, right? After all the gates you had me open and close at the Farm, there’s no way that didn’t occur to you.”

“...Well, yeah, but before I could go to you, Akari told me to stay with her for the night, so...”

“Isn’t it weird, thinking that you can’t turn to me for help, just because Akari got there first?”

She was quick to interrupt me, and I got flustered. “N-No, um, see,

like I was saying, I thought you might be too busy.”

Toriko looked down at me coldly, saying nothing.

S... Scary. She's scary, but I'm not gonna give in...!

Now that I was feeling defiant, I mustered all the willpower at my disposal and tried to look Toriko in the eye. However, when I did, Toriko turned away, and gazed out the window.

“Normally, you tell me about everything, don't you?”

She sounded sad when she said that. It instantly dissipated that defiant spirit I'd had a moment ago, and I suddenly found myself unsure of what I should do. There wasn't any real reason I didn't turn to Toriko for help... I think. I had simply wanted time to sort out my feelings.

When we were about to use the gate to return from the Farm in Hannou, we encountered something weird in the Cattle Barn.

The cow with the face of a man, or man with the face of a cow—Kudan.

It had the face of my dead father.

It spoke with the voice of my dead grandmother.

That was enough to shake me up terribly. It was so bad that even once the monster was gone, I still couldn't speak for a while.

My former family, who had fallen in with a cult, to the point they threw everything else away, and then ended up dying in the mountains. Being confronted with a part of my past that I had cast away was an entirely different kind of shock than encountering monsters in the other world.

There was someone in the other world who had identified us as individuals, and had made probing attempts to approach us before. Out of all of them, this was the one that touched the deepest into my personal life.

I'd started to forget those dead people, too.

Back then, Toriko had asked me some questions out of concern. I couldn't answer. Even when I tried to explain, the words wouldn't come out. I mean, what good was talking about my dead family going to do? I had told her it was a personal matter, and tried to leave it at that, but Toriko didn't seem satisfied, and things got a little awkward.

It worked out nicely for me that Toriko got busy right around then. I wanted time to myself to calm down after the Kudan encounter threw me into emotional disarray.

But, ultimately, I wasn't able to sort my feelings out. While Toriko was away, all I managed to do was avoid thinking about all the unpleasant things.

The train slowed as it approached the last stop in Ikebukuro. People swayed due to inertia as the brakes kicked in, and I was pressed up against Toriko.

“...Sorry.”

As I looked up awkwardly, Toriko stared back at me. I was caught off guard by how troubled she looked.

“Sorawo, listen...”

“Huh?”

“If you don’t want to stay at home...”

As she spoke, her eyes swerved away from mine again. Her words cut off mid-sentence, and her mouth hung half-open for a moment before she closed it. Her tongue peeked out, wetting the surface of her lips.

“If you can’t go to Akari’s, or Kozakura’s, and you have nowhere else to go, then, uh...”

In that moment, I suddenly understood what Toriko was struggling to say.

If I had nowhere else to go, why don’t I go to her house?—that was what she had started to say, then hesitated.

Kozakura said that Toriko and I were a lot alike. In the same way that I didn’t want to let other people into my house, I’m sure Toriko didn’t want to, either. Once I realized that, I felt terrible. I didn’t want to make Toriko show me so much concern.

Talking over her, I said, “It’s fine. I’m going to be okay.”

“Huh? But...”

“Don’t worry about me. Thanks.”

Toriko looked like she was still going to say more, so I jokingly said, “Hey, why don’t you come stay at my place? Haha, just ki—”

“I’ll come over.”

“Huh?”

I blinked in surprise. It was like she had been waiting to say those words. Toriko continued, even more powerfully. “I’ll come over. I’m going to stay at your place.”

“Huh...?”

The train slid into the station as my mind raced to catch up. The door on the opposite side opened, and a wave of people surged out. My body freed from the crush, I took a step backwards, away from Toriko.

Toriko stood where she was, her eyes never leaving me as she said once more, “I’m coming over.”

“Y... Yeah.”

As I nodded, overwhelmed by her intensity, there was a rush of air as the doors on our side of the car opened.

near my house. We took the bus from Minami-Yono on the Saikyo Line when we went to Natsumi's house during the Sannukikano incident, too. But on that day, I walked with her to the station, we ate, and then split up after that. Neither of us suggested she might come to my place.

Today, we ignored the bus stop near the Ichikawa Automobile Repair Shop, and kept going. Toriko sat next to me in the stifflingly narrow bus seats, as if that were the most natural thing to do. It felt kind of weird.

I grew more and more tense as we got closer to my place.

"It's fine if you want to stay the night, but... What are you going to do for a change of clothes?"

"I've got one."

"Why?"

"I always have one in my bag. You do, too, Sorawo."

"Oh, right..."

We never knew when we might wander into the other world, so we tried to keep a change of clothes on us at the bare minimum. If she had that and a towel, she'd be fine for a one-night stay. When I stayed at Kozakura's yesterday and Akari's the day before, I had packed my overnight set into a small travel bag, so I'd had a little more baggage than usual.

We got off the bus close to the university and walked through the residential area a little ways. Yeah, this really did feel weird. It was strange walking these same paths I always did, only with Toriko at my side this time.

Toriko didn't talk much. She was looking around the area as we walked. Every time we turned a corner, she looked back. It was the same way she acted when we went into a new place in the other world. She was trying to remember the way...

We turned the last corner and stopped in front of the apartment. It was a fresh experience for me, seeing my home under the midday sun. The fact that Toriko was standing there with me made me feel like I was floating, detached from ordinary life.

"This the place?"

"Yeah?"

"Which room?"

"102."

"And which room is the one that's weird?"

"The one in the back. 103."

Toriko nodded, then thrust her hand into her bag.

"Whoa, whoa. Don't just shoot the place up out of nowhere, okay? I won't be able to live here anymore."

"I know. This is just in case."

“Just in case, huh?”

We entered the corridor and walked in front of my apartment. Toriko’s eyes were trained on the door to Room 103.

“Can we... just go into my room for now?”

“Okay.”

I turned the key, and went to open the door, but this time Toriko hurriedly stopped me. “Whoa, you’re being so careless.”

“Huh?”

“There could be an ambush.”

“I-I think it’ll be okay.”

“When they’re already in the next room?”

“...You have a point.”

Now that she mentioned it, she was right. The strong desire I had for my home to be a safe space might have been stopping me from making level-headed judgments. But if something *was* in there, what was I supposed to do? If I lost my safe space, I had no idea where to go...

Noticing I had gone silent, Toriko looked at me with concern. “You okay? Do you want me to look inside for you?”

I hesitated for a moment before nodding. She was going to be coming inside anyway. “Could you?”

“Okay. You keep an eye out in case anyone comes along.”

“Okay.”

Toriko narrowed her eyes, pulling the Makarov from her bag, and holding it close to her bosom, like she was hugging it.

“Hey, hold on.”

“Just in case.”

“Seriously, I’m counting on you here.”

“Okay. Open the door.”

I turned the knob, and the door opened wide.

Toriko peeked in through the door for just a moment, then swiftly pulled away, holding her gun out close to her chest, and entered the room once more.

The light shining in through the door shone on the kitchen floor. The curtains in the six-mat room in the back were drawn, and it was a little dark inside.

Toriko walked into the kitchen without taking off her shoes.

“Whaaaaa...”

While I was still flustered, Toriko turned on the lights in my bathroom, and peeked inside. Then, heading straight to the back of the room, she pulled open the curtains. Outside light shone in and lit the room up.

I lost sight of Toriko for a moment, and the next thing I heard was the sound of my closet doors being opened. *Whoa... Have some mercy,*

Toriko, I thought. I don't think there was anything in there that I'd be worried if she saw, though...

Toriko returned the gun to her bag, then came back to me.

"Looks clear to me. Sorry about the shoes."

"Nah, it's fine."

Toriko and I both took off our shoes, and headed inside the room. I used a little broom I'd bought at the 100 yen shop to sweep up the dirt Toriko had tracked in and threw it outside. When I came back in and closed the door, Toriko was standing in the middle of the room, a slightly dazed look on her face.

"What's up?"

"...This is really something, huh?"

Toriko was looking at my bookshelf. With the rare exceptions of books I used at university and some Sanrio character books, it was filled more or less from top to bottom with books about true ghost stories. Titles from Media Factory, Kadokawa Horror Bunko, Yama-kei Publishers... I had everything from famous books, to older ones that I had hunted down at second-hand shops. The largest segment of the collection by area had to be Takeshobo Bunko's white spines. There were hundreds of volumes, all with unsettling words like "Terror," "Hex," "Ghost," "Curse," "Burial," and "Bizarre" in their names. Looking at all of them lined up like this, it seemed incredibly ominous.

"You don't have nightmares sleeping next to books like these?"

"No, I don't. I've gotten used to them."

"You know, I was looking forward to seeing just what kind of bookshelf you had..."

"Does it live up to your expectations?"

"I didn't think you'd gone this far." Toriko looked at me as if she wanted to ask something.

"What?"

"I know it's a bit late to ask now, but you don't mind someone seeing your room?"

Yeah, it really is a bit late, I thought, but answered anyway. "I thought about it a lot, and... Well, if it's you, I'm fine with it."

"If it's me?"

"I'd never want anyone else to."

"Why? Because you don't want them to see this bookshelf?"

You're pretty weirded out then, huh?

"That's not the problem. I want this to be a place where I can feel at ease. I don't want to have to be considerate and think about other people's feelings in my own home."

"Does that mean it's okay for me to be here?"

"It means I can tolerate you being here."

“Heheh.” Toriko let out a goofy chuckle. “It’s hard to know how I should interpret that.”

“It’s high praise, coming from me.”

“Okay, I’ll be happy about it.”

I threw the travel bag that was still slung over my shoulder onto the bed.

“You put down your bag, too, Toriko.”

“Sure.”

All right.

We both looked towards the wall I shared with Room 103 in unison.

“What do you think we should do?” Toriko asked, pulling her gun out of her bag as she did.

“I already told you...”

“I know. No guns, right?”

“No guns.”

“But we’re still going, aren’t we? To the room next door. I just can’t see you waiting for them to come to us.”

She knows me well.

It was true that I planned to go to Room 103 before they came to us. I was going to open that door, and walk inside. I fully intended to mess the place up.

“...Well, we don’t know if the door’s locked or not yet.”

“That’s true. If we can’t get in... Why don’t we head out for a bit and get some lunch? We never even had breakfast.”

“Okay... All right. Let’s go, then.”

10

Ding dong...

Ding dong...

Di-di-di-di-ding dong. Ding dong. Ding dong...

No matter how many times we rang the bell, there was no response from Room 103.

“Toriko, if we overdo it, people are going to come out of the other rooms.”

“Huh? People in other rooms can hear this?”

“This building is every bit as run-down as it looks.”

Toriko reached down and grabbed the doorknob. She slowly turned her gloved hand. “It’s not locked.”

She stopped and turned back to me. I nodded, and Toriko cautiously turned the knob.

“Urgh...” Toriko and I groaned in unison. There was an intense stench coming from the open gap in the door.

“What is this...? Did someone die?” Toriko asked.

“No, this isn’t the smell of something rotting...” I had smelled something like this before. Just recently, too.

It didn’t take long to remember.

“...It’s the Farm.”

The beastly stench of feces, urine, and grime all mixed together assaulted my nose.

It was the same stink as the Cattle Barn at the Farm.

The door opened wide. Outside light shone in, illuminating a pile of dust and cobwebs in the corner of the floor.

“Is anyone there?” Toriko called out. No response. It looked like the room was, in fact, empty. The kitchen was bare of dishes, and there wasn’t even a gas burner. There was nothing but the stench of some animal wafting out of the vacant room. The frosted glass doors between the kitchen and the room in the back were closed, and it was dark behind them.

I realized Toriko was looking at me with concern. “Sorawo, are you all right?”

“...Why do you ask?”

“Because you’re looking pale.”

I shook my head, dismissing the memories of the Kudan and the cow woman that the smell was dredging up.

“Sorawo—”

“I... I’m fine. It just stinks.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Let’s go in.”

For now, at least, there was nothing weird within my right eye’s field of vision. I entered Room 103, gesturing for Toriko to do the same.

This time, I didn’t hesitate to leave my shoes on, either. I gently opened the door to the bathroom. I tried the light switch, but maybe power wasn’t connected, because the lights didn’t turn on. Shining the flashlight I always carried with me around, I found a number of thin metal plates had been left in the bottom of the tub. The way there were screws all over them reminded me of the glimpse I caught of the “resident” of Room 103’s wrist when they were opening the door.

Leaving the bathroom, I put my hand on the glass door. I signaled to Toriko with my eyes, and opened the door, then came very close to screaming.

Toriko must have been able to see what I was seeing, too, because I heard her inhale sharply.

It looked like there was a person sitting in the middle of the dimly lit room. They were facing away from us, with long hair dangling down their back.

“Wh-Who—?!”

No. I didn’t need to ask that, because if I thought about it with a clear head, they were obviously an illegal trespasser, but that was the word that immediately came out of my mouth.

The figure sat there, unmoving. I turned the light on it and, as I stared, I finally realized what was wrong.

“Sorawo, stand back.”

Toriko tried to put herself in front of me, but I put out a hand to stop her.

“Toriko, it’s not human.”

“Huh?”

“This thing... It’s just hair.”

I was wrong about there being a person sitting there. A wooden tension rod was standing there with a long-haired wig hanging off of it.

In front of it was an old mirror stand. That was all there was in the room.

“Oh, this is—!” I recognized it immediately. I had read about this setup in a net lore story called *Pandora*, or *Kinkisaki*.

Pandora was an account of the terror that some children encountered when they went into an abandoned house in the countryside. Those that opened the drawers of the mirror stand that was left there, and looked at what was inside, lost their minds and never recovered. The cause was a special ritual performed in that family which used fingernails, teeth, and hair as a catalyst. It brought about a curse that harmed not only the family themselves, but their immediate neighbors, too.

Though the name of the person that hair belonged to was sometimes given as *Kinkisaki*, that was just one potential reading of the characters “禁后”. The actual reading was a secret.

“Toriko, don’t open the drawers. I swear, nothing good will come of it.”

“...Roger.”

I looked at the mirror stand with my right eye. A silver phosphorescence was leaking out from beneath the cloth that covered the mirror.

“I knew this was it.”

I carefully pulled back the sheet, and the silver phosphorescence spread out, dimly lighting up the area. The exposed mirror had turned into a gate. It was a peephole into the other world—one too small for a person to pass through.

I peered through the mirror. When I focused with my right eye, my own mirror reflection faded, and I could see the other side of the gate more clearly.

There was a house. It stood there, alone. A horribly-aged two-story building on a road with nothing but rice paddies. I circled around the house, but there was no front entrance.

A glass sliding door on the first floor was shattered to pieces, and I was able to enter through there. I moved from the living room, which had no furniture, into the dimly lit hallway. There were stairs leading up to the second floor on the right. Looking left, there was a mirror standing in the hallway and a woman sitting in front of it. Her back was turned to me, her face buried in her hands. The woman wept endlessly, doing nothing but stuffing the voluminous black hair that she was holding into her mouth.

There were a number of children standing down the hall, past the mirror stand, staring wordlessly at the woman. They all carried backpacks and were dressed like they were headed out on an excursion.

The stench of some animal caught my attention. I turned, and saw someone climbing the stairs from behind. Following them up to the second floor, there were two doors, one of which was open. Inside, there was another mirror stand. Beside it stood a Red Person, so tall their head nearly touched the ceiling.

The Red Person pointed to the mirror stand. In the lower portion of it, there were three drawers.

I opened the bottom one. Inside, there was a piece of paper. It had a word I didn't know the reading for written on it. I opened the second drawer. Inside, there was a piece of paper.

The Red Person watched over me.

With mercy. And tolerance.

Like a mother.

I knew the word written on the paper was a person's name.

A woman's name.

If I opened the third drawer, I would know its reading.

That was because there was another piece of paper inside.

It carried the name's hidden reading.

The reading of the forbidden name.

The true name.

It was my name.

The soul of the woman it was given to had left this word, and been welcomed to eternal paradise.

Look. I raised my face, and the women who, like me, had learned their true name looked back at me. They smiled happily, placidly, and in unison they mooed, and mooed. The shijiru cry of a penitent cow.

"Sorawo!!"

The vision before my eyes distorted rapidly, crumpling up like a wad of paper.

Toriko's left hand had grabbed and torn the gate in the mirror stand; the silver phosphorescence splattered all over. Her five translucent fingers had torn holes into not just the gate, but the glass, too. The glass shattered in her clenched fist, and there was a sound like a splash of water as she crushed it.

"Sorawo! Can you hear me? Do you recognize me?"

I sat there in a daze as she shook me, her face pale with worry. "...Wha."

I tried to speak, then cleared my throat. It felt so dry. Like I had been screaming for a long time.

"What? What happened?" Once I managed to get my voice back, Toriko collapsed on the spot.

"Whew..."

"Huh? What? What?" From Toriko's reaction, whatever the situation was, it must have been pretty horrifying. But no matter how much I tried to remember, the memory of what I'd seen beyond the gate faded, like a dream when you wake up in the morning. I could hardly recall anything.

"You froze up when you looked into the mirror, Sorawo. It was like you were looking at something really bad, so I..." Toriko unclenched her fist, and the remaining shards of glass fell to the ground with a tinkle.

"I broke it... That was okay, right?"

Now that she mentioned it, I noticed the general atmosphere of the room had changed. The animal smell had vanished. I couldn't detect it at all. There was a small mound of broken wood and shattered glass where the mirror stand had been.

I looked around the room with my right eye. "I think it's fine."

"Then... The problem's solved? This room is clear?"

I nodded. "Probably. The gate's been completely destroyed."

That was probably because she smashed the prop that it was using as a catalyst. If placing a piece of set dressing from a ghost story could artificially open a gate to the other world, like Runa Urumi's cult had done at the Farm, then it made sense that smashing that catalyst would destroy the gate.

"Thank goodness..." Toriko said, sounding truly relieved. I noticed red drops on her translucent left hand, and my eyes went wide.

"Toriko, you're bleeding!"

"...Ohh," Toriko said—as if just noticing for herself—and looked down at her translucent left hand.

She'd cut herself on the mirror shards.

Trying to save me.

Without thinking, I grabbed her hand. Crimson droplets quivered on her translucent skin.

It was beautiful.

“...It bleeds red, huh?”

“I’m glad it’s not invisible. Then I wouldn’t be able to tell if I was bleeding,” Toriko quietly replied to my mumbling. She gently pulled her hand away from me and brought it up to her mouth. I watched her lips, entranced, as she sucked the blood from her wound.

She lowered her arm. “Can you stand?” she asked embarrassedly.

That brought me back to my senses, and I finally stood up. “Does it hurt? Is it deep?”

“It’s nothing major. I just cut myself a little.”

“Let’s head back and wash it out. There could be shards of glass inside it still,” I said, turning towards the door, and when I did I noticed something off about the light shining in through it.

That was clearly the yellow-toned light of evening.

“Toriko... How many hours were we here?”

“Huh? Hours? It hasn’t even been ten minutes... Or it shouldn’t have...” Toriko noticed something was up, too, and her words trailed off.

When we left Room 103, we were greeted by what was unmistakably a sunset scene. I checked a clock. It was 5:00 PM, despite the fact that it hadn’t even been noon yet when we entered the room.

As we looked at one another, perplexed by this inexplicable phenomenon, my stomach loudly grumbled.

There was a moment of silence, broken when Toriko said, “...We missed lunch.”

“It’s already nighttime.”

“Want to go out and eat? I’m in the mood for drinks.”

“There aren’t many options around here, you know?”

“Okay, in that case... Let’s go to the store and buy some stuff, then have drinks back at your place.”

Drinking at home, huh...? This was a new direction for Toriko’s after-party series.

“You’re fine with going to a regular supermarket?”

“Sure.”

Autumn days were short. By the time we had washed Toriko’s cut, put a bandage on it, and were ready to head out, it was nearly dark.

As we headed to the supermarket in the well-lit residential district—I had a sudden realization.

I’d stayed in the same room as Toriko before. In the “New York-style” pension in Naha, and at the resort hotel on Ishigaki Island. Now that Toriko was staying the night at my place, I was suddenly reminded of what she wore to bed those two times. In the resort hotel, the room had come with bathrobes, so she wore one of those. But the

first time, at the pension, Toriko had been sleeping in the buff. I distinctly remembered her saying something silly, like she slept naked when she was in the mood to.

And I didn't have bathrobes at my place.

I know she had said she'd brought a change of clothes, but those were probably the clothes she'd be wearing tomorrow, not a pair of pajamas.

“What's up?”

Toriko gave me a worried look as I got very quiet.

I looked back at her, still silent. I couldn't possibly have asked —“Are you going to sleep with your clothes off tonight?”

File 14: The Inviting Hot Springs

1

It was a day late in the fall months when Kozakura called. “I have something to talk to you about. Could you come over tomorrow?”

That was unusual for her—it was the first time, actually—so I was pretty bewildered.

“Why so formal?”

“Oh, it’s nothing major.”

“Can’t we talk over the phone?”

“It has to be in person.”

“Whaa...? Now you’ve got me scared.”

“Oh, shut up. Quit your grumbling and come,” she snapped, and hung up the phone. I cocked my head to the side a moment, then called Toriko.

“...So, that’s what she said to me. What do you think?”

“Hmm? I wonder.”

“Has she ever said that to you before?”

“Nuh-uh.”

“I wonder if she’s gonna yell at me. I don’t think I’ve done anything to deserve it.”

“I dunno. Maybe she’s got something to give you.”

“I doubt it.”

That was how Toriko and I decided to meet up after my classes let out the following evening, and we headed to Kozakura’s house. When she poked her head out and saw us, Kozakura scowled.

“You two went out of your way to come together?”

“I didn’t know what this was about, so I was scared...”

“Is me tagging along a problem?”

I had my guard way up, but Kozakura just gave me a look of exasperation.

“I told you it was nothing major, didn’t I? Here, have this.” With that, she handed me an envelope. For a moment I thought it might be cash, but it was thin.

“What’s this? Can I look inside?”

“Just open it already.”

I pulled a piece of paper out of the envelope, and Toriko and I looked at it together. It said: “Nationwide Hot Springs Trip Pair Ticket.”

“You can have that.”

“Huh?” I replied, not quite understanding, and Kozakura mockingly bowed her head to me.

“You’re welcome.”

“Th-Thank you?” I looked down at the ticket in my hands once more. “Um, what is this?”

“Sorawo-chan, are you illiterate now?”

“I can read, but... Why give this to us?”

“They sent it to me as a stockholder benefit. I have no use for it on my own, but you two fit the bill perfectly.”

“You’re sure?! Thanks!” Toriko cried out with innocent glee, throwing her arm around my shoulder.

“Isn’t this great, Sorawo?”

“Y-Yeah.” I was still staring at the ticket in bewilderment. “Hot springs trip...?”

Even saying the words out loud didn’t make it feel any more real to me. I just couldn’t imagine myself going on something like that.

And with Toriko, too...?

Not noticing my confusion, Toriko spoke up. “Can we use this at any hot spring, Kozakura?”

“I don’t know. Look it up yourself. Isn’t there a list of participating locations printed on the ticket?”

“Oh, hey, you’re right. Sorawo, let’s decide where we’re going.”

“Uh, sure...”

“We’ll have to buy swimsuits, too.”

“Swimsuits? Why?” I asked, and Toriko looked at me as if it was obvious.

“Huh? We need swimsuits to go to the hot springs, right?”

“No. Most places, you go in naked.”

“...Huh? Seriously?”

Once we talked about it some more, it became clear that Toriko had been imagining something like the recreational center she went to in Canada. In Canada, when you talk about hot springs, it’s usually a large warm water pool, where swimsuits and beach sandals are required, and there aren’t separate pools for men and women.

When she heard that Japan’s hot springs weren’t like that, and that they were actually large baths that a large number of people used at the same time, Toriko got shaken up.

“I-I see... They’re actually baths...”

“Huh? You really didn’t know this?”

“I’d heard before, but I assumed that was the exception...”

Kozakura and I looked at one another.

“Well, um... if you’re uncomfortable with the idea of bathing with other people, you don’t have to force yourself, you know?” Once I said

that, I found myself in a strange mood. I wasn't exactly super comfortable with bathing with other people, either.

"There have to be places in Japan where you bathe in swimsuits, too. Why don't you go with one of them?" Kozakura suggested, but Toriko seemed bothered by that, and shook her head.

"...I'll go."

"Your eyes are glazing over. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. I'm going." She vigorously raised her head, and shot me a grin. "Let's get in the hot spring together, Sorawo...!"

"Y-Yeah."

I winced at how shifty Toriko was acting. What was up with her? It's weird for me to say this, but even *I* could tell something was up, so it had to be pretty bad.

"Well, that's that then. You two figure out the rest yourselves. Have fun."

"Uh, okay."

"When you're buying souvenirs, I'd like something sweet," Kozakura said, not even bothering to look at us anymore. Toriko turned to go, but I didn't move, so she stopped.

"Sorawo? What's up?"

I made up my mind, and opened my mouth. "Um, Kozakura-san?"

"Hm?"

"If you want, why don't you come with us? To the hot springs..."

2

"Whaaa?!" Kozakura cried out in surprise. Toriko's eyes widened, too. Their shocked expressions made me cringe a little.

"What're you saying, Sorawo-chan?"

"Huh? You can't?"

"It's not that I can't. But why drag me along when I'm telling you two to go enjoy yourselves?"

"Well, you've been helping us out a lot lately, haven't you, Kozakura-san?"

"I'm happy to see that you have some awareness of that, Sorawo-chan."

"So, I don't want to just keep taking without giving anything back."

"You don't need to be so considerate. Though, I wish that you had shown some very basic consideration at an earlier stage of all this."

I didn't have any response for Kozakura if she started digging up the past, so I just repeated myself. "Will you come to the hot springs with us?"

"I don't wanna. It's too much of a pain. Hey, Toriko."

“Huh?!” Toriko cried out in confusion when Kozakura suddenly turned to her.

“You don’t want me tagging along, either, right?”

“Uh...”

“See? Sorawo-chan, it’s not good to just say whatever you think of. You should always check with the people going with you first before you—”

“I don’t mind!” Toriko cut her off. “I don’t mind. Come with us, Kozakura.”

“Huh...?” Kozakura furrowed her brow, looking from me to Toriko, and then back again.

“What is this? Are you plotting something? I don’t want any surprises.”

“That’s not it. You were the one who brought this up in the first place, right, Kozakura-san?”

“Look, that’s a pair ticket, so I’d have to pay for myself out of pocket, right? You think I’m going to pay money to have to sleep next to you two lovebirds? No way.”

“I’ll be the one paying. To thank you for everything you’ve done.”

“I’ll pay, too! Let’s go, Kozakura! It’ll be so much fun with the three of us there!”

As Toriko joined me in enthusiastically inviting her to come along, the furrows in Kozakura’s brow deepened. Soon enough, her eyes widened as she seemed to realize something.

“Ohh... Is that how it is?” Kozakura said, gazing up at the ceiling in exasperation.

“What do you mean, ‘Is that how it is?’”

Without answering my question, Kozakura glared at the two of us and muttered, “You’re hopeless.”

“Wh... What does that mean?!”

“Ye... Yeah! We were just inviting you to come on a trip with us!”

Kozakura looked down on us as we protested. “Do you need a chaperone that badly? I don’t want to have to look after you two when I’m on a trip, too.”

“You won’t have to, okay?”

“If anything, we’ll look after you, Kozakura.”

“Yeah. You won’t have to do anything, Kozakura-san,” I said.

“You just have to be there.”

“I’ll even feed you, okay?”

“Are you mocking me? Listen, I’m not going. Just go enjoy yourselves without me, will you?”

“Kozakura-san,” I said.

“Kozakura...”

Kozakura snorted. “Those sad eyes aren’t going to work on me.

No. I'm not going. Not a chance. Absolutely not. End of discussion. Got it?"

"..."

"I said, got it? Hey."

"..."

"Hey..."

3

That weekend, on Saturday morning, I was waiting at our usual meetup place in Ikebukuro—the above-ground ticket gate at the Seibu-Ikebukuro Line—which was surrounded by advertisements for anime targeted at women, when Toriko came running up the stairs. Her brilliant golden locks and ridiculously beautiful face made her instantly recognizable in the crowd. It was like there was a spotlight shining on just her. The way that light was rushing straight towards me was impactful enough to make it hard to breathe. Whenever we met, I always froze up like a deer in headlights.

It was no surprise that I could spot Toriko, but the mysterious thing was how fast she could pick me out of the crowd, too. Unlike her, I was totally plain. Maybe it was just because she was tall and had good eyesight?

...Wait, no. It was because of the color of my right eye. Yeah, of course she could see that from a mile away.

"Sorry I kept you waiting!" Toriko breathlessly stammered once she reached me.

She was wearing a gray parka, with a men's military-style jacket over top. On her lower half, she wore black skinny pants and a pair of Converse sneakers. Toriko set her Boston bag—which bore the image of a zoo on a blue background—down on the ground, and wiped the sweat from her brow.

"That's a cute bag."

"Huh? Yeah, thanks."

"It looks super heavy, though... What's in there?" I asked.

"Just a change of clothes and the other usual vacation stuff. I might've messed up and brought too much."

My own bag, a mustard-colored backpack, was a whole lot smaller than Toriko's. Toriko shouldered her luggage, and we walked through the ticket gate together.

"We don't need to take the express, right?"

"Yeah, the semi-express is good enough. It's already here, so let's get aboard."

Ignoring the line that had already formed for the express, we ran across the platform to where the semi-express had stopped. We put

our bags up on the luggage rack, and sat down to relax; trains heading away from the urban core were not that busy at this time of day. Soon, the doors closed and the train departed.

"I'm starting to worry I didn't pack enough, but... we don't need that much stuff, right? There ought to be convenience stores in the area..."

We had settled on a hot spring hotel in Chichibu. Though it was in the mountains, it wasn't cut off from civilization.

"It's my first time going on vacation with you, so I didn't know what I should bring," Toriko confessed.

"Is this... our first time?"

I cocked my head to the side. It might have been fair to say that our repeated trips to the other world weren't "vacations," but...

"We spent three days together on Ishigaki Island, didn't we?"

"We were both halfway to going insane at the time. It wasn't a planned trip, either. We just found ourselves there before we knew what was going on."

"Well, yeah... I guess you're right."

We spent most of our time on Ishigaki drunk, so, to be honest, my memory of it was spotty. Because of the psychological damage from the terror we encountered on the beach in the other world just before going there, we spent most of our time not thinking about anything. Our mental states were a little weird at the time. It was so bad that I managed to buy the AP-1 on a drunken impulse, and then completely forget I had...

"This is a proper vacation, and the first one I'm going on with someone who isn't family, so I really agonized over it."

"Huh? It is?"

"Yeah. I went camping with some school friends when I was a kid. But that's about it," Toriko said.

"Is that a fact? Hmmm."

"Huh? What?"

"Oh, I just thought you'd be used to going on vacations. I'm a little surprised."

"Mama dragged me around all over the place. But I never went on my own."

So she never went on a vacation with Satsuki Uruma then, I thought, and it felt kind of good. It came with the unfortunate side-effect of unconsciously scanning the crowd for a woman in black, but any time I managed to one up her, I couldn't help but feel a little rush of glee.

...Maybe I was petty.

The semi-express reached Shakujii-kouen in about ten minutes. We got off the train, temporarily deposited our heavy bags in the coin lockers, and went to ring the bell at Kozakura's now all-too-familiar

mansion.

Shortly thereafter, a sleepy Kozakura poked her head out. "You seriously came...?"

Squinting in the daylight, Kozakura's voice sounded hoarse, as if she had just woken up.

"You ready to go?"

"Somewhat, yes." Kozakura rolled a plain silver suitcase out the front door.

"That's huge..."

With a glare at Toriko for the unwanted opinion, Kozakura locked the door behind her. "You dragged me along after I told you I didn't want to go, so I'm going to insist you look after me well."

"We will. We will," I said.

"Yes, we will," Toriko agreed.

With a deep sigh, Kozakura started walking. "You two are such a handful. I wish I'd never thought to give you that ticket."

"Well, we're glad you agreed to come along. Right, Toriko?"

"Right."

"Be careful with that. There's a computer in there."

As Toriko pulled the suitcase along, the sound of its wheels rolling echoed behind us—almost like the growl of some ill-tempered beast.

4

Once we had collected our luggage from the coin locker, we boarded the train again and transferred to the express train at Tokorozawa. Ridership was high because it was the weekend, but there was a lot of space in the area where our seats were facing each other, so it didn't feel cramped.

Kozakura squirmed around for a while as she tried to find the best way to sit in the large seat. Ultimately, she settled on sitting cross-legged while facing diagonally.

"This is why I hate going outside. Most chairs don't agree with my build," she said grumpily.

"Well, there are kiddie seats..."

"I *will* kill you."

Kozakura's death threat shut Toriko up before she could finish that insensitive comment.

It was a little less than an hour from here to the final stop, Seibu-Chichibu. I was still debating whether or not to buy one of the boxed lunches they sold at the station when the train departed. The car we were in was a new one with a name like Laview, or something like that, and it ran surprisingly quietly. Toriko and I were seated side-by-side, while Kozakura sat in the window seat across from us. As I

watched the scenery drift by out the large window, I started to get sleepy.

Letting out a big yawn, I suddenly noticed that Kozakura had drifted off before I could. The tablet laying in her crossed legs was powered off. I looked beside me, and Toriko was sleeping with her head on her hand, too. They beat me to it! If they were both out, I had to be the one to stay awake.

The reason I had invited Kozakura along was exactly as she'd suspected. As much as I hated to admit it, I was hopeless.

To be honest, I was scared. Of the idea of getting into the bath with Toriko alone.

No—to be a bit more honest, I was scared by the fact that Toriko was scared. I wasn't particularly used to bathing with other people, either, but I had during school trips in primary school and had gone to the super bathhouse during my life on the run. So, while I was a bit flustered when I heard it was a trip for two to the hot springs, my only thought about getting in the bath with Toriko at the time was, *Yeah, I guess that might be a thing that happens, huh?*

But Toriko was far more flustered than I had been. Because she was from Canada, I would understand if she was a bit weirded out by Japan's culture of mingling while naked in the bath. But that wasn't what was driving Toriko's shifty behavior. Her gaze kept drifting from my face, down to everything below the neck, and then back again. When she realized I'd noticed, her eyes froze on mine, and didn't move.

“Let's get in the hot spring together, Sorawo...!”

I was never going to forget the look on Toriko's face when she said that to me. She was blushing up to her ears, acting more shy and bashful than ever.

In the same way that embarrassment was infectious, once I knew Toriko was feeling shy, I was, too. Once I became aware of it, it was too late. It was beyond embarrassing to get naked in front of Toriko, and I couldn't help recalling that momentary glimpse I had caught of her in the nude that morning at the “New York-style” pension in Naha.

I was too embarrassed to look at her face when she was right beside me, and that scared me. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before.

This was bad news. My relationship with Toriko was heading for a dangerous corner, and I wasn't going to be able to make the turn like this. There would be a major accident. That rising sense of crisis set off fireworks in my brain as I scrambled for a solution. What I got was the idea of inviting Kozakura.

“Why don't you come with us? To the hot springs...”

For some reason, I was confident that if the two of us went alone, something weird was going to happen. Something there was no turning back from... I think Toriko sensed it, too. I say that because she backed me up, even though we hadn't talked about it. Kozakura was pretty hesitant, but we needed her to come along no matter what it took. That was Toriko and me sending an SOS to Kozakura.

Since we were going to be footing the bill for her train fare, lodging, and food, and also offered to carry her bags, as well as any souvenirs she decided to buy, Kozakura folded under our combined efforts to persuade her. She had looked super exasperated, like this was a real imposition, but Toriko and I were relieved. I definitely felt like we had overcome some kind of crisis. Since then, Toriko and I hadn't said one word about the subject.

The train reversed direction at Hannou. It's what you call a switchback, I think? The other passengers around us were turning their seats to change the direction they were facing. We had been facing each other the whole time, so we stayed as we were.

I glanced sideways at Toriko. I had seen her face countless times before, but I could never get used to it. I always thought, *What is a girl this beautiful doing next to me?* It made it even worse that she was beautiful even when she was sleeping in her seat. If I let my guard down and dozed off like that, my mouth would hang open, I'd start drooling, and it'd just be a sad sight to see.

Then, as if she noticed my glance, Toriko's eyelids opened slightly. "Hm...? Sorry, I fell asleep," she said, rubbing her eyes. She yawned, and then her eyes drifted to me, and the scenery outside the window.

"Where are we now?"

"We just passed Hannou. You can sleep. We had an early morning, so you must be tired. Kozakura-san's sleeping, too."

"Yeah... Thanks. With all the packing I had to do, I barely caught a wink of sleep, y'know..."

I don't know how that happened. It was close by, and we were only staying two nights. I only brought a change of clothes, a toothbrush and toothpaste, the bare minimum in terms of makeup, my laptop, and some cables for it.

That, and my trusty and reliable Makarov. You never knew what might happen, so I always put it in my bag when heading out these days. I also had a basic exploration kit with medicine, a flashlight, and emergency rations. Those items were with the Makarov in a waterproof musette bag I had bought at an outdoor specialty store.

Outside the window were the mountains of Hannou in autumn colors. Our Farm was somewhere out there. There were several gates in that bizarre facility constructed by cultists, still untouched, all leading to unknown places.

We couldn't today, but... which would we explore first? I was excited just thinking about it.

Kozakura must have been dreaming, because she suddenly flinched in her sleep. I thought she might wake up, but she just mumbled something, then was quiet again.

I was dreaming up our next expedition on my own, but occasionally the thought that I was about to get in the hot spring with Toriko would butt in, making it impossible to focus.

Geez, it's just a hot spring. What's the big deal? Kozakura's going to be there, too. We won't be alone. There's nothing to worry about.

It's gonna be fine.

Fine?

What's fine, and how?

I sat there, silently losing my cool, as the Laview Express sped towards its final stop in Seibu-Chichibu.

5

"Huh? I feel like I've been here before," Toriko said, mystified, as she looked around in front of Seibu-Chichibu Station.

"You only just realized?!" I said in exasperation. "We came here that time with Hasshaku-sama, remember? We were at a shrine in Chichibu when we came back from the other world."

"Oh! That was here! I remember now. We caught a taxi on a mountain road, came back here... ate some katsudon at the station, and went home, right? It had a gaudy name. What was it again?"

"Golden Waraji Katsu."

"Yeah, that was it. That wasn't so long after I first met you, huh? Oh, the memories," Toriko said fondly.

I don't think it had been so long that she should be feeling nostalgic, but it felt so far in the past now. I still didn't trust Toriko back then, and Toriko couldn't have known what kind of person I was. I think our relationship changed a lot in the six months since then. But as for how it had changed... I wonder. I didn't really know, but it had gotten a lot better. I think that much was certain.

There was a building with a number of facilities, including a hot spring for people making day trips to the area, as well as a food court, attached to the station building. It was full of climbers who were about to go up the mountain, or had climbed in the early morning and were on their way back. It was just about noon, but from the way things looked, all the restaurants were going to be packed.

"What do we want to do? Are people hungry?" I asked, and Kozakura, who already looked sick of the crowds, shook her head.

"Food can wait. Let's get to the hotel first."

“Okay. Is that cool with you, too, Toriko?”

“Sure. Let’s go.”

The hotel offered a shuttle service, but if we called now, it would probably take some time for it to arrive, so we decided to take a cab instead. If Toriko and I split the bill, it wouldn’t be too expensive... probably.

I feel like my spending has gotten out of control ever since I met Toriko. The old me never would have used a taxi here. If this was what happened when I had too much financial leeway, I might have less self-restraint than I thought.

We caught a cab in front of the station and loaded Kozakura’s suitcase into the trunk. When Toriko and I didn’t put our own bags in there as well, the driver seemed mystified. Our guns were in them, though, so we didn’t want to let them out of hands’ reach.

The taxi left the station and headed towards the mountains. We drove along the twisty mountain roads for about half an hour. The higher the car climbed, the more the greenery around us took on a yellow tinge. When maybe a third of those yellow leaves had turned to red ones, we spotted a large building emerging from the trees. It was an aged wooden structure, with a large tree spreading its branches out over top of the tiled roof. It was the hot spring hotel we were heading to.

The moment we got out of the car in front of the entrance, Toriko started sniffing the air. “What’s that smell?”

“The hot springs, probably.”

“Oh! ...That makes sense,” Toriko mumbled, sounding flustered. It looked like she had nearly forgotten we were going to the hot springs.

The door at the entrance was made of smooth, dark wood, and the glass in it was slightly warped, speaking to the past era in which it was built. The door slid open with a rattle, revealing a lobby with a red carpet. I was surprised to find that the area for taking off your shoes was full of black leather ones.

“They’re busy, huh?” Toriko said, following my gaze. I nodded.

“A group of businessmen, maybe? I hope they aren’t noisy.”

We took off our shoes in the entranceway and put them on the shoe shelf. There was a stuffed bear and mountain birds, as well as Japanese dolls in gaudy kimonos, staring at us as we crossed the lobby in slippers.

“Why’d you choose this place?” Kozakura asked, seeming a little creeped out by the glassy stares of the taxidermied animals.

“Because it’s a long-running establishment with good reviews, and the food is supposed to be delicious, and...”

“And?”

“This was the only place that would let us change from the ticket’s

two person plan to a three person one.”

We checked in at the front desk, then walked across the creaky floorboards to our room. Toriko looked back at the lobby.

“This has to be the first time I haven’t received a key at the front desk,” she said, sounding mystified.

“They’re fusuma sliding panels, so there aren’t any locks.”

I happened to look out the window from the corridor and was surprised to notice that the ground was further down than I expected. I didn’t recall climbing any stairs, but we had ended up on the second floor at some point. I looked at the floor map. This hotel was built on a slope, and the entrance we had come in through was one level up. They had extended and renovated the building over many long years, so there were all sorts of odd-angled corners and slight height differences of ten to twenty centimeters. The brand-new Wi-Fi router cable looked anachronistic running along the stained ceiling that had probably stood for over a century.

We were led to a bright room that had to be three times the size of my apartment. A scene of fall leaves spread out outside the window.

Toriko cooed with delight, and pressed herself up against the window to look at it. “Wow! This is amazing. There’s a river flowing right over there.”

Kozakura looked up at me. “This is a pretty nice room, isn’t it? Is this going to be okay?”

“It will be, thanks to the ticket you gave us.”

“Well, okay then... Where’s my room? Next door?”

“Here.”

“Huh?”

“We’re all in the same room.”

When I said that, Kozakura was nonplussed. “Huh? I’m staying in the same room as you people?! I don’t wanna.”

“Why not?!”

“Didn’t I already say that I don’t want to have to sleep in the same room as you lovebirds?! You two can have fun on your own. It’d feel stupid for me to be there, too.”

“That’s not true at all.”

“Yeah. Don’t be like that, Kozakura.”

When Toriko returned from the window to assist, Kozakura let out an irritated sigh. “Aww, geez. Fine then. Dammit.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Let’s all just have a good time together.”

“I’m not going to have fun,” Kozakura said bluntly.

“Kozakura, where do you want us to put your suitcase?” Toriko asked. Kozakura strode across the room and stood next to the window; there was an area with a table and chairs in it between the shouji dividers and the windows. If I recall, the proper term for this sort of broad veranda was *hiroen*.

“This is it. I’m making this my territory,” Kozakura declared, and sat down in one of the two chairs. She frowned and moved her butt around for a while, but eventually found a position that suited her. “If I’m in here, I can always close the shouji when I get fed up with the two of you.”

“Oh, yeah, this sort of narrow space is pretty nice, huh? I like it, too,” I said.

“Really? I prefer something more spacious.”

We each unpacked our luggage, and lazed around for a while. I didn’t have anything in particular to do, so I boiled water in the electric kettle and made green tea with a tea bag. Then, I munched on the complimentary snacks that had been left on the table while looking at my phone.

Kozakura pulled a laptop, tablet, and more out of her suitcase, then plugged a power bar into the wall so that she could charge all of it. Toriko looked at the array of electronic equipment spread out across the little table in the *hiroen* with dismay.

“What did you come here to do, Kozakura?”

“To work, like normal. Go ahead and do your thing. Don’t mind me.”

Toriko’s massive bag, on the other hand, produced a raincoat, a pair of boots, a canteen, the sort of thick sweater you might wear in the middle of winter, and all sorts of other stuff that took up lots of space.

“Were you planning to climb the mountains, or something?”

“I had no idea what this place was going to be like, okay?!”

Pouting, Toriko pulled a swimsuit out of the bottom of her Boston bag. I recognized it as the one she’d bought at the Donki in Naha.

“Huh? What’d you bring that for?”

“I thought I might use it...”

“There was a sign at the front desk asking us to refrain from wearing swimsuits in the bath.”

“Yeah, I saw...” Toriko said regretfully, and returned the swimsuit to her bag. Hoping to get things back on track, I took a deep breath, then turned to Kozakura.

“What do you want to do now?”

“I’m hungry,” Kozakura replied, and I nodded. It was pretty late in the afternoon. I was peckish enough that snacks weren’t cutting it anymore.

“When’s dinner?” Kozakura asked.

“7:00 PM,” I replied.

“That’s a ways off still... Is there a dining hall or anything like that in this hotel?”

“It looks like there’s a cafe,” Toriko said, looking at the hotel map.

“Okay, let’s go there then.”

“Oh, we’ll be paying for you, Kozakura-san,” I reminded her.

“You don’t have to tell me every time.”

We left the room. We put our valuables in the safe first, but Toriko still felt uneasy about the room having no lock.

The cafe next to the lobby didn’t have a lot of food items on its menu. After talking it over, we decided to order steamed sweet potato with sweet miso sauce and a number of varieties of bread that they said came from a local bakery to share. We had specifically avoided rice bowls, udon, and soba in order to save room for dinner, but we still ended up going heavy on the carbohydrates. It was like we were trying to fatten ourselves up with this meal. In terms of drinks, Kozakura ordered a cola, I got melon soda, and Toriko had coffee.

Once we had finished eating, and relaxed a bit, Toriko spoke up. “What’s next...?”

“Why don’t you two hit the bath while it’s still light out?” Kozakura said in between taking sips of her second glass of cola through a straw.

“Huh?!” Toriko cried out.

“Why are you shouting?”

“You want us to take a bath this early?”

“You can take as many baths as you want, whenever you want. This is a hot spring.”

“Is that how it works?”

Toriko looked to me, as if hoping I’d save her.

“Y-Yeah. It’s a hot spring,” I replied.

“You can go in the hot spring as often as you want?!”

“I’m not that knowledgeable about it myself, but apparently, yes. That’s what you do at a hot springs hotel.”

“I-I see... Hmm...”

Toriko started fidgeting nervously. She rocked herself back and forth, pressing both her hands on the chair for support. Her restless eyes looked past me, to the poster on the wall for the Chichibu Night Festival. They locked onto it, as if she was suddenly fascinated, and couldn’t look away. I would have bet money that she wasn’t reading a word of it.

I nearly held my head in my hands.

Toriko...

Why are you doing that...?

Why are you acting so restless...?

This is weird...

It's just a damn bath!!!

Unable to take it anymore, I stood up. "Let's get in the bath."

Toriko looked up at me, shocked. I practically glared at her as I repeated myself. "Let's go. Before it gets dark. Okay?"

"O... Okay."

"Good." I nodded, and Toriko's head bobbed up and down in response. The expression on her face still seemed dazed.

"See you later," Kozakura said, waving. The look on her face told me she thought we were being ridiculous.

"You come, too, Kozakura-san," I said.

"I don't wanna."

"Kozakura-san."

Kozakura stubbornly shook her head. "I'll go by myself later. I don't want to go in with you people."

"Kozakura-san," I said.

"Kozakura," Toriko added.

"Hey."

"..."

"..."

"...I loathe both of you."

7

We walked underneath a red half-curtain and into a changing room that was so new and shiny that it seemed out of place in this old hotel. It looked like it had been recently renovated. With the towels and yukata that we had brought from our room under our arms, we each found an open locker and set up camp in front of it.

We weren't the only ones in the changing room—there were a number of other guests, and someone was always opening the glass door between here and the bath to go in or out. Toriko's eyes were bulging at the sight of so many women of different ages walking by, clad in nothing more than a towel. I had to do something.

"Don't stare so much," I whispered in her ear.

"Wha?" Toriko let out a startled cry, and I almost laughed. This was actually getting more and more fun for me. There had been a number of times I thought, *We really grew up in different environments, huh?* before now, but this was the first time it hit me so hard.

"You two can't even go to the bath without adult supervision? I'm appalled. Why don't you wear diapers for the rest of your lives?" Kozakura muttered as she put a 100-yen coin into the locker.

"Oh, Kozakura-san, I'll pay that..."

“I can pay this much on my own! Besides, you get your money back later, anyways.”

As for Toriko, she was standing there, frozen, in front of an open locker.

“You okay, Toriko?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“You take off your clothes here. Just bring the key, the pouch with your bath set, and a small towel with you.”

“I know.”

Do you, really...?

It didn't look like Toriko was going to move unless I set an example, so I sucked it up, and started taking off my clothes.

The fact was, by this point, a lot of my initial embarrassment had started to fade. Once we were inside the changing room, there were plenty of naked people around, and if I thought about it calmly, all we were doing was taking a bath.

But still...

Ohh, Toriko.

Why must you stare at me so?

Ignoring the painful stare coming from beside me, I took off all my clothes quickly, and took a deep breath before turning to face Toriko.

Toriko's eyes bulged, and she stared at my naked body. Without taking off a single piece of clothing herself.

Just strip already...

“Toriko.”

When I called her name, she blinked, as if waking from a dream. “We're going on ahead.”

“Oh, okay...”

Like me, Kozakura had already gotten naked. I felt Toriko's gaze following us as we opened the heavy glass door and entered the bath.

The smell of sulfur grew stronger, and steam clouded my vision.

I poured hot water over myself, sat on one of the plastic chairs in the washing area, and took the shampoo out of my pouch to wash my face. As I was rinsing the lather off, the door to the changing room opened, and a lonely-looking Toriko walked in, just barely managing to conceal her front with a towel.

I had been preparing myself for this, but now that I was seeing Toriko naked for the first time since Naha, I felt my breath catch in my throat.

Why is she so... beautiful? Every part of her is stunning. Like a work of art, I thought. A living, breathing work of art...

As I stared at her in admiration, Kozakura muttered, “What is this, a Botticelli?”

“...Huh, a what?”

“She looks like that painting of Venus on the shell, doesn’t she?”

I finally got it, and burst out laughing. It was true—Toriko did resemble the painting *The Birth of Venus* right now; in the way she was covering herself, and the confused look on her face, too.

Once I laughed, the strange tension I’d been feeling vanished.

“Toriko, over here.”

The newborn Venus was visibly relieved when I put my hand up and called out to her.

“What do we do now?” she asked.

“We wash ourselves before getting in the bath.”

“Huh? Every time?”

“If you’re not that dirty, you can just pour hot water over yourself. You saw the spot with flowing hot water to the right of the entrance, right? Fill a bucket there and wash the sweat off before you get in,” I explained like I knew all this stuff. Honestly, I hadn’t been confident that I did. That’s why I looked up “hot springs etiquette” online before coming...

“Hey, what about this?” Toriko lowered her voice before exposing her left hand, which was hidden by the towel.

“...Oh.”

I looked at Toriko’s translucent hand, my mouth hanging open.

“Sorry, I totally forgot.”

“Me, too. I had so many other things on my mind.”

We had both been so preoccupied with the idea of getting in the hot springs that it completely slipped our minds how badly Toriko’s hand was going to stand out once she took her gloves off. Sure, my eye stood out, too, but since you could see right through Toriko’s hand, it was immediately apparent that there was something abnormal about it. We’d gotten so used to all the things that happened to us...

I glanced around to see how the other people were acting. We were in the washing area where it wasn’t easy to see, so we were safe for now, but once we got in the bath, there could be problems. Toriko was beautiful, and that wasn’t just my personal bias speaking, so she was bound to draw attention.

“Well... You can hide it with your towel until you get in, right? It’s hard to see under the water, so it’ll probably be fine,” Kozakura suggested, sounding a little awkward. Apparently Toriko and I weren’t the only ones who had forgotten about this particular problem.

Toriko sat down next to me and hesitantly started washing her head.

“This feels so weird. Getting in the bath with other people like this.”

“It’s fine. You’ll get used to it,” I said, pretending to be a veteran.

Once I set my mind to it, bathing with Toriko was surprisingly easy. I just had to avoid looking beside me. If I thought about it, naked or not, Toriko’s beauty always made me feel confused, and I couldn’t look directly at her, so I just had to act the same as I always did.

Toriko still seemed to be having trouble calming down, and kept glancing my way as she washed herself.

It’s okay, you’ll get used to it...

Rinsing off the suds with the shower, we headed for the bath. Since we had come all this way, I wanted to enjoy an outdoor bath, not an indoor one. The crisp autumn air wrapped itself around our bodies as we opened the door to head outside.

“It’s cold!” Toriko cried.

Kozakura, myself, and Toriko—in that order—quickly ran across the cobblestones and got into the outdoor rock bath.

“Phew...” We all sighed as the hot springs warmed our cold skin.

Taking Kozakura’s example, Toriko had her hair tied up, too. Just as I was thinking this style gave me a rare look at the exposed nape of her neck, Toriko turned towards me and our eyes met. I gulped.

“I’m not allowed to put my towel in the water, right?” she asked nervously.

I calmed myself down and answered. “No, that’s taboo. It’s absolutely not allowed.”

“It’s that big a deal..?”

We rested our backs against the edge of the rock bath, and stretched our legs out. The three of us in a row, just zoning out for a while. Looking over top of the wall around the outdoor bath, I could see the mountains with their autumn leaves, and the blue skies full of wispy clouds.

“Phew,” Toriko exhaled. “Maybe I’m getting used to this.”

“I know, right?”

“But it’s still strange, you know? In our ordinary lives, out of all the private moments we have, bathing is still a really private activity. I can’t think of anything on the same level other than the toilet, or bed.”

“I understand the toilet, but bed, too?” I said that without really questioning it, but both Toriko and Kozakura stared at me, so I got flustered.

“Di... Did I say something wrong?”

Kozakura looked away without saying a word. It looked like Toriko was refraining from commenting, too.

What...?

Feeling awkward, I slid my butt forward, and sank in up to the

bottom of my nose.

I don't know. I'm just going to stop talking now.

"Were you fine from the beginning?" Toriko asked me.

"Burbles, burbles."

"Huh?"

"Burbles, burbles, burbles."

"Are you drowning?"

I gave up and resurfaced. "It... still feels weird to me. Normally, if you get naked in front of other people, you get arrested, but once we're inside the changing room, everyone just strips. And they act like it's totally normal."

"You think so, too, huh?"

"Maybe everyone else knows the right way to behave in this sort of place, but... I feel out of sorts. I see everyone else around me naked, so I assume it's okay for me to take off my clothes, too. I'm just imitating them," I explained.

"No one really understands it," Kozakura said nebulously.

"Is that how it is?" I asked.

"That's how it is."

The hot springs slowly melted away my physical and emotional tension. The clouds drifted by, the birds chirped, and I listened to the endless sound of falling water. The autumn breeze felt wonderful on my flushed face.

Toriko let out a hot sigh, and wiped her face. "Sorawo..."

"Hmm?"

"How long do we stay in here for?"

"Huh? There's no real rule. As long as we want..." I said, looking next to me, then panicked as I noticed Toriko's face looked as red as a boiled octopus.



“A-Are you okay?”

“I’m feeling a little woozy...” The blood had risen, turning the nape of her neck and her ears pink. Because of how pale she was originally, it stood out even more.

“Get out. Get out. You’re going to faint.”

“Yeah...” Toriko picked herself up, and sat down on the rocks.

“There’s a cold water bath inside for people who use the sauna, so go cool down there.”

“Okay... I’ll be back in a bit.”

I watched with concern as Toriko got up and walked away.

“Maybe you should go with her, Sorawo-chan?”

“Good point.”

I started to get up, but Toriko turned the palm of her open hand towards me.

“I’m fine, I’m fine. It’s not that bad.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’ll go cool my head a bit.”

“Don’t push yourself. You can head back before us if you want.”

“Gotcha.” Though she seemed a little unsteady on her feet, Toriko managed to head back inside.

“It’s pretty hot in here, you know?” Kozakura noted.

“I think it’s perfect,” I replied.

“Me, too.” Kozakura stretched both arms over her head. “Phew. Now that I’m here, the hot springs aren’t so bad.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“I never would have come on my own, so I should thank you....”

“What’s this, all of a sudden? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like! Just accept my thanks!”

I was having a hard time believing it, but Kozakura was actually in a really good mood. Toriko had left us alone, and this seemed like a good opportunity, so I decided to ask her something that had been bothering me for a while now. “You know how I told you a gate opened up in the room next to mine recently?”

“Huh?”

“Toriko came over, and we managed to get it sorted out, but I don’t really remember what happened. That was the first time they’ve ever gotten that close to me, and I really didn’t like it.”

“...Right.”

“Before that, I had a cow with a human face talk to me at the Farm, and it brought up some super personal details. From my life.”

“Could you not seamlessly shift to talking about this paranormal stuff?”

“Not even at a bright, relaxed place like this?”

“That’s not the problem!” Kozakura tried to get up and run away, but I grabbed her by the wrist.

“L-Let go.”

“The scary stuff stops here. What I want to ask you is more of a theoretical question.”

“What is it?”

“How do you think the things in the other world decide who to make contact with?”

Kozakura scowled at me, then resignedly sank back into the bath. “First, let me hear what you think, Sorawo-chan.”

I let go of Kozakura’s arm. “They—though I don’t really know if it’s a ‘they’ or not—will try to scare us and drive us mad with terror in order to induce an altered state of consciousness.”

“If we theorize that the entities in the other world have a will of their own, it might be possible to say that.”

“At the very least, I think it appears that way. And in order to accomplish their goal, they make use of the templates and details of ghost stories. By peering inside our heads.”

“What criteria do they use to choose their victims?”

“I had always thought it was accidental before now. Because true ghost stories don’t explain why the people involved had such a scary experience. They just happened to be there, and had the bad luck to run into a paranormal phenomenon. There’s no more reason behind it. I thought the phenomena triggered by the other world were following the same trends as true ghost stories. But...”

I was hesitant to speculate further, but Kozakura pushed me to continue. “But?”

“Recently, it feels like they’ve been blatantly targeting me. Maybe I’m being overly self-conscious, but the two most recent cases felt less like accidents, and more like direct attacks.”

Kozakura glanced around. The outdoor baths included a waterfall bath, and a lay-down bath in addition to the rock bath, but there didn’t seem to be anyone in earshot of us.

“What was this ‘personal information’ of yours, exactly?”

“The faces and words of my father and grandmother after they fell in with the cult.”

“Was that something frightening to you?”

“Well... Yeah. It was scary. Something I thought I had left in the past suddenly resurfaced. It may have been partly because that caught me by surprise, but I got pretty shaken up.”

“That’s nasty.”

“You said it. I reflexively shot it.”

“Oh, how I hate talking to you.” Kozakura gazed up to the heavens and groaned.

“That’s enough of my story... What do you think, Kozakura-san?”

“One thought I had was that what looks like an attempt at contact from the other world to us may be a mirroring of our own human attachments.”

“Attachments?”

“For instance... Let’s consider Satsuki.” There was a graveness in Kozakura’s voice. I listened quietly, and she hesitantly continued.

“Toriko went to the other world with you, and encountered something with Satsuki’s form. But that didn’t happen to me. For a while after she vanished, I worried about Satsuki, too, but I wasn’t about to arm myself and go searching the other world for her. I was scared, and I didn’t feel like I had any right to be her partner anymore. I had already given up on her by then.”

There was a hint of self-derision in the way she spoke. I had made the decision not to engage with their feelings for Satsuki Uruma at all, so I drove that out of my head as I considered the idea.

“Do you mean that Toriko hadn’t given up on Satsuki-san? And the reason we’ve stopped sensing Satsuki-san’s presence is that her attachment to her has weakened...?”

If so, that was a desirable outcome.

“I mean, she dislocated the ASMR girl’s jaw and crushed her mother’s eyes as we watched. Anyone would be put off after they saw that. That thing was a monster, even if it was shaped like Satsuki.”

Kozakura shuddered and sunk into the water up to her shoulders.

“If the beings of the Otherside were to use human attachment as to approach us, then the strong conviction that Toriko had in pursuing Satsuki might have made her the easiest for them to work with. Now that her attachment has faded, yours may have stood out more.”

“You mean that they changed the target from Toriko to me?”

“I think we should put off deciding if the entities we’re dealing with have a conscious will for now. We don’t know anything about them.”

“Hrmm,” I groaned and wiped my face. “This is tough. If what we’re up against is a ‘phenomenon’ with no will of its own, I won’t have anything to get mad at.”

“Do you have to get mad?”

“I get weaker when I’m not angry.”

Kozakura gave me a meaningful look.

“What?”

“Sorawo-chan, you saw a phantom of Satsuki that Toriko couldn’t, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You were never interested in anyone but Toriko, right, Sorawo-chan?”

“What does that have to do with this...?”

“Continuous anger is a form of attachment. It’s possible that the Satsuki you were seeing was a manifestation of your obsession with her. The Satsuki who appeared before Toriko in the other world, and the Satsuki that you were seeing might, in fact, be two different entities entirely.”

When I heard that, I jumped a little. It might have been because I was being cautious, but on multiple occasions I had caught myself looking for Satsuki Uruma in a crowd, and gotten even madder at her.

“If something appears in Satsuki’s form again, the cause might be you, not Toriko, this time.”

“...That doesn’t feel good.”

My opinion was met with a cynical laugh.

“This is all just supposition, though.”

I scooped water into my hands, and washed my face.

“If your theory is correct, then would that mean... if I can cut off my attachment to the past, I’ll stop being attacked? But I don’t think I’m *that* hung up on it. I’d forgotten, actually.”

“That may just be what you think, and in actuality you’re suppressing the memories.”

“You could say that about anything, couldn’t you?”

“Maybe. Whatever the case, you’re the only one who understands you. I’m not a shrink.”

My attachment to the past...

It wasn’t hitting home for me, but could that be it? I don’t think what happened to me was anything noteworthy, so I didn’t have the sense I’d tried to forget some unpleasant memories.

But they do say that crazy people don’t realize they’re crazy, after all...

As I was thinking about it, Kozakura opened her mouth again. “If you have a lot of regrets and lingering emotions, it gives them that many openings to work with. That’s true whether you’re dealing with humans, or beings from the other world. Even if you had forgotten it up until now, if you confront your past and settle things, no matter how it goes, I don’t think it’s a bad idea.”

“Confront my past and settle things...”

She could be right, I was thinking when Kozakura seemed to remember something.

“No, wait. Knowing you two, it seems highly likely you’d do something illegal in the process. I take it back. Forget what I said.”

“Whaa...?”

The wind blew past, stroking the beads of sweat on my skin. It was still light out, but I could tell evening was approaching.

“She’s still not coming back, huh?”

“I did tell her she could go back without us, but... Maybe she’s passed out somewhere.”

“I guess we should go check on her.”

Kozakura and I got out of the bath and shuddered in the cool autumn wind as we headed back indoors.

8

We bought coffee milk drinking boxes from the vending machine and collected Toriko from one of the massage chairs before leaving the changing room.

As we passed through the lobby, I noticed the pile of black shoes by the entrance had completely disappeared. Either their owners had headed out somewhere as a group, or the shoes had simply been tidied away.

I was feeling a little lightheaded after the bath, so we headed back to the room to relax for a while, and when 9:00 PM rolled around, one of the staff came with dinner.

The traditional kaiseki cuisine that lined our table was more eye-catching than anything I had ever seen.

“This is sea urchin, fall salmon, and okra with grated yam.”

“This is an appetizer with roast duck, arugula, and tomatillo.”

“This is catfish with rock tripe, chrysanthemum flower, and ginger juice.”

“This is fried sweetfish and marsh crab.”

“This is masu salmon cooked with salt.”

“This is a clear soup with lotus fruit and sheet tofu.”

Toriko watched, her eyes sparkling, as they explained what each dish was, even if I still didn’t really get most of it.

There must have been a party somewhere, because we could hear boisterous voices from another room.

“It’s busy today, huh?” I asked the staff member.

“Huh? Well, yeah.”

When I casually brought it up during the explanation, the waitress gave me that sort of vague response, so I reaffirmed my resolution to never try to engage in small talk with someone I don’t know again.

The waitress laid the food out on the table as I suffered in silence, then bowed to us and took her leave. “Please, take your time.”

The kaiseki course came with three large bottles of beer. “You don’t need to worry about pouring my drinks for me,” Kozakura said as she opened one of the bottles. Toriko and I looked at one another, then nodded. The thought had never crossed our minds.

We each poured our own beer, and then clinked our glasses together.

“Here’s to Kozakura, who made this hot springs trip possible!”

“I’ll drink to that! Thanks, Kozakura-san!”

“Yeah, you better be grateful. Cheers!”

Because we were in a private room, with no need to concern ourselves with the watching eyes of others, and were relaxing after a hot bath, the alcohol may have flowed more quickly than usual. As we worked through the meal, punctuated by regular comments on how delicious it all was, we gradually got more and more inebriated.

We used the internal phone to order more beer three times, and by the time we finished the matcha milk tofu that was our dessert, all three of us were totally sloshed. The next thing I knew, Toriko and Kozakura were both dozing with their heads in my lap, and I was patting their hair while half-asleep myself.

How did this happen again? I wondered as I looked down at their sleeping faces. *They both look so content...*

I stopped patting, and called out to them. “Hey, get up.”

“Ngh...” Toriko groaned.

“Come on, please. Wake up.”

“No... I don’t wanna...”

When I shifted my legs and their heads fell to the tatami floor, the two of them finally came to their senses. I got them to their feet, where they shambled like zombies, then fixed their yukata before calling the waitress and having her take away the dishes. I then chased the two of them into the three futons that were laid out in a row, and finally laid down on top of the sheets myself.

I’d worked hard. It was pretty praiseworthy, if you ask me.

I passed out for a little while, then suddenly woke up again. The room was pitch-black. I must have turned out the lights before I collapsed, though I had no recollection of doing so. Damn, I was good...

It was silent in the room, and outside it. I felt around for my phone, and when I found it, the glare of the screen was painful. It was 2:00 AM.

“Ungh...” Toriko groaned in the futon next to mine.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” I apologized in a whisper.

“What time is it?” Toriko asked without raising her head.

“Just past two.”

“I’m sweaty... and I stink of booze...” Toriko said like a petulant child. Well, I guess children don’t normally smell like alcohol.

I was all sweaty, too. Maybe warming up in the bath had raised my metabolism. My yukata was damp and clinging to me.

I sat up. “Hey, why don’t we hit the bath?”

“Is it open? At this time of night?”

“We should be able to get in 24/7 here.”

“Huh? Wow, that’s amazing.”

Kozakura groaned and turned in her sleep. We stopped talking and looked at one another in the light of my phone, then snatched up our towels and a change of clothes before quietly sliding the fusuma aside and walking out into the hallway.

As we walked through the old hotel with creeping steps, we both started giggling in unison. It was like I was a kid again, exploring an unfamiliar mansion. Looking next to me, Toriko had a mischievous smile on her face. I didn’t have to ask to be able to tell she was thinking the same thing I was.

Even the lobby, which had been bright when we passed through earlier, had been reduced to the minimum amount of light needed at the front desk. Over by the wall, the glass eyes of a taxidermied bear and some mannequins stared at us out of the darkness. There was one staff member behind the counter, which was the only place lit up, but we felt like we were playing a game of hide and seek, and rushed past while their back was turned. There were quiet footsteps as we walked across the red carpet in the darkness. Did she see us? Or did she not? The two of us whispered back and forth excitedly.

The changing room was bright even at this hour. There was only one guest here other than us: a woman wrapped in a bath towel, sitting in front of the sink and blow drying her hair.

We were free to use whichever lockers we wanted, but we deliberately chose two that were next to one another. This time, Toriko was the first to take her clothes off. She undid her obi and dropped her yukata to the floor, then quickly pulled off the T-shirt and panties she had on underneath. Seeing me agog, the now naked Toriko laughed.

“Ahah!” I laughed out loud despite myself, too. We were like total kids right now.

I tried to take off my own yukata, but I was struggling with the obi, which was tied too tight. Toriko reached out to help. Once her long, dexterous fingers loosened the knot and pulled, the obi came undone easily, and my yukata fell open. When I got naked, I heard a little squeal from Toriko. All we were doing was undressing together, but she sounded beside herself with glee. Hurriedly stuffing our belongings into the lockers, we raced over to the washing area.

Even though it was late at night, there were still a number of other guests in the large bathroom. They must have woken up in the night and come to rinse the sweat off like we had.

“Sorawo, let’s go outside!”

“Okay.”

We poured hot water over ourselves with a small bucket first, then headed to the outdoor baths. There was nobody out there. We

screamed at how cold it was, then got into the rock bath again. Once we had sunk into the hot water, we both breathed a sigh of relief.

"This is fun..." Toriko said, sounding like she really meant it. "I have so much fun being with you."

"Yeah. Me too." My honest feelings slipped out. "I want to be with you like this forever."

"Me too!"

"I feel like I could go anywhere with you."

"You could. Let's go."

"Yeah. Let's!"

Once we said all that, the embarrassment finally set in, and we both cackled with laughter.

We got out of the rock bath before the heat started to get to us and tried out some of the other baths that were outside together. There was the waterfall bath, with a small stream of water coming out of the wall, and the lie-down bath where hot water flowed over flat rocks, jar baths that were small enough they only fit one person... All we were doing was warming ourselves up in the bath, but when we did it together, it was a whole lot of fun. I felt like we were playing around in an amusement park.

Once we had tried out everything, we headed back to the rock bath. We sat shoulder-to-shoulder, and gazed up at the night sky. Because of the light from the bathing area, it didn't quite look like the stars were going to come falling down on us, but seeing the fall constellations on a quiet night was still pretty romantic, to say the least.

"It's beautiful," I murmured, and Toriko leaned her head against my shoulder.

"Hmm? What's up?" I asked.

Toriko gave me a goofy smile. "Sorawo, I love you."

"Thanks. I love you, too," I replied without a second thought. I was feeling more emotionally honest than ever before, so it didn't bother me in the slightest saying something that I'd normally have been too embarrassed to.

Toriko gulped.

Finding that strange, I turned to look at her, and her face was so red I could tell even in the night. Her indigo eyes were wet and quivering.

Oh! The heat's getting to her again, I thought, but the very next moment I felt her right hand on my left, searching for, then grasping it.

I felt like I'd been hit with a jolt of electricity, and I couldn't move.

"You mean it?"

Her voice was a little hoarse.

“You really mean it?”

All of a sudden, with no forewarning, I found myself in a terrifying and dangerous situation again.

It was like we were holding hands on the edge of an abyss that, once we fell down it, there could be no return from. Without knowing whether those hands would pull us back from the edge, or drag both of us down.

I stared vacantly at Toriko. Her eyes clung to me. It looked like her own words had shocked her. Sensing that the next thing I said might cause her to collapse completely, my tongue froze.

Looking Toriko straight in the eye, I cautiously nodded.

Her grip on my hand tightened. Her eyes widened even more. Her breathing was quick, and shallow, as if she was panicking.

I stayed there, holding her hand, without averting my eyes. It must have helped her to calm down, because I could see the tension slowly melt out of Toriko's shoulders.

I wasn't in any position to relax yet, but Toriko was the one in more danger right now. In an attempt to calm her down, I managed a smile.

Toriko lowered her eyes. The drops of water behind her long lashes sparkled, and I couldn't help but be taken by her beauty. Her gaze slowly drifted down my body. Her moist, colorful lips let out a sigh.

“Yo...!”

Yo?

“Your boobs are cute... Sorawo...”

The world came to a stop. In a bad way.

I looked back at Toriko, anger seething in my chest.

In a situation like this... that's what you're gonna say...? That, of all things?!

Come to think of it, she had been looking my way a lot during the day, and it had felt like she had been eyeing my breasts. So I wasn't imagining it?

And here I was, doing my best not to stare!

Why, you little...!!!

Just as I was about to yell at Toriko louder than I ever had before, another figure leaped into my field of vision. I saw someone there, over her shoulder, in front of the waterfall bath.

Noticing my gaze, Toriko quickly turned to look, too.

“Oh... There was someone there.” She gave me an awkward sideways glance, which I returned with a glare while covering my breasts. What was this perverted blonde planning to do if there *wasn't* someone here, huh?

“Huh? Hold on... Isn't something weird?” Toriko furrowed her

brow.

What is? Don't try to dodge the subject!

"That person isn't moving."

"Huh?"

I looked over her shoulder again. Toriko was right. I thought they must be a guest because they were naked, but they weren't getting into any of the baths. It was like they were frozen there, mid-step.

The very next moment, I stood up despite myself. "It's not a person."

"Huh?"

"It's a mannequin."

Toriko stood up, too. Was the chill I was feeling the night air, or fear? I couldn't tell which. That was clearly a plastic mannequin that had been left standing on the cobblestones.

"Something's weird here. Let's get out."

Toriko nodded, a tense look on her face. We got out of the rock bath, and hurried, dripping wet, back to the indoor baths.

Oh, no. Oh, *no*. This had to be the absolute worst time for the Otherside to try and make contact with us. I mean, we were both stark naked. This was no joke.

"Urgh..."

When we opened the door to the indoor baths, we both groaned.

Everyone in the baths and the washing area had been replaced with mannequins. A mannequin sitting on a plastic stool, posed like it was washing its head. A mannequin in the jacuzzi, looking up at the ceiling. They were mannequins in the same positions as I had seen the people before, and in exactly the same poses. Was it possible they were like that to begin with, and we just hadn't noticed?

Rushing through the indoor baths, we opened the door to the changing room, and were greeted by the sound of a dryer. The woman who had been drying her hair by the sink was in the same position as before. She was a mannequin, too, of course. Maybe because the dryer had been blowing on the same place all this time, the side of her head looked a little charred.

We opened our lockers, worrying the whole time that she was going to turn around, then quickly wiped ourselves down and threw on our yukatas without anything underneath.

"Let's go!"

"Yeah...!"

We left the changing room and ran back to the lobby. In the darkness, I looked and saw that the front desk lit up, and was relieved.

The very next moment, I realized that was a mistake. The staff member at the counter had their back to us, and didn't turn when we raced over to the desk. I didn't feel any need to double-check that they

were a mannequin, too.

As we tried to head back to our room, we came to a stop. Down the dark corridor, in the light of the green emergency lights, we could see there was a figure blocking our way. It was a male mannequin. It had its arms raised and bent in a W shape, and was looking straight at us. It was wearing a sweatshirt, and a brimmed hat.

Either my eyes had adjusted, or it was slowly approaching. The features on its face were getting easier to make out.

We had both left our guns in the room. Did we have to head towards that mannequin to get back?

No, hold on.

I thought back to the map of the hotel. The layout was a little bit complex because of all the things that had been built onto it, but if we took a detour, there was another way.

“This way, Toriko!” I pulled her by the hand, and we ran down another corridor that led off the lobby.

Right away, there was another staircase going down. There was a series of large private rooms downstairs, and the long corridor was lined with fusumas.

The moment we turned the corner, there was a taxidermied bear blocking the way, and Toriko and I jumped backwards. Hey, wasn’t this guy in the lobby before?!

We slipped past the unmoving stuffed bear, but at every corner there were stuffed birds and deer peering out through the openings in the fusumas, and they always gave me the chills. The echoes of our footsteps were the only sound in the silence of the hotel. Eventually, we hit another set of stairs. From upstairs, we heard boisterous laughter, and the sounds of plates and cups hitting each other. It was the party!

We looked at one another in relief, finally having come across sounds made by people. Normally, I’d have been mad at them for partying this late into the night, but this time I wanted to praise them for it.

Looking up the stairs, I saw a whole bunch of slippers neatly lined up. The corridor soon came to an end, and there was a fusuma at the end of it. The fusuma was ajar, light and sound leaking out of it.

That’s when a hand reached out of the gap, and closed the fusuma right in front of us.

“Huh? Hold on,” Toriko blurted out, reaching for the fusuma. I didn’t stop her. We were both desperate to hear the sound of ordinary voices. Even though we knew we’d be seen as strange for barging in on them, we wanted nothing more than to see normal human beings drinking and partying.

However, the moment Toriko slid the fusuma open, all of the

sound and light vanished.

“No way,” I murmured, dumbfounded.

The room we thought the party was being held in was dark, with tens of mannequins just standing there.

“Sorawo, behind us!” Toriko shouted a warning, pointing back the way we’d come. When I turned around, there was that mannequin with the hat from before, his nose peeking over the edge of the stairs we had just climbed.

He’s gonna catch us! The only place to run was inside the room. We wove our way between the mannequins, which were spread out thinly, and the opposite wall was a fusuma, too.

Through it, there was another dark room. Inside were a number of mannequin arms lying on top of the tatami floor. For some reason, there was laundry piled next to them, and a female mannequin on all fours, like she was crawling. We kicked the arms out of our way and kept running.

When we opened the next fusuma, I saw the back of a man wearing a yukata. He was sitting cross-legged, his back to us. There was an old CRT TV in front of him. It turned on, as if it had been waiting for us to enter the room. The flickering blue light lit up the man, and us...

Instinctively, I turned my right eye on the TV. Once I confirmed the silver haze around it, I shouted.

“Toriko! Touch the TV!”

Toriko immediately understood. Just as I noticed her translucent hand leaving an afterimage in the darkness, she touched the blue screen. She clenched her hand into a fist, and pulled, sending a splash of silver across the room.

Suddenly, I noticed the sensation of tatami under my feet had vanished, and Toriko and I were falling. We fell through the infinite darkness, hand-in-hand, and—

9

“Ahhhhh?!”

Toriko and I sprang up from our futons in unison.

“Whoa, what?!”

Kozakura was sitting in a chair in the hiroen, looking at us with surprise.

“H... Huh?”

It was morning. The shouji screens were open, and there was bright light shining into the room.

“Good morning,” Kozakura said sarcastically.

“Go... Good morning,” I stammered.

“Good... morning.”

“Did you both have a bad dream?”

Toriko and I looked at each other in confusion.

A dream...? That was absurd. There were no gaps in my memory. We had woken up in the night, gone to the bath, and fled after encountering mannequins... No, or was it a dream from the beginning? The whole time, from when I woke up in the middle of the night?

In my confusion, I suddenly realized where Toriko was looking. I followed her gaze, and when I saw my yukata was open at the chest, I remembered I didn't have anything on underneath. I knew it wasn't a dream! When we fled the changing room, we put our yukatas back on without any underwear out of haste.

I pulled my yukata shut to hide my exposed flesh, and glared at Toriko. Toriko looked away, playing innocent.

Listen, you pervy blonde. I haven't forgotten that terrible line of yours, you hear?

But... if it wasn't a dream, how had we gotten back to our room?

Kozakura yawned and stood up.

“Phew, that's the first time I've been completely out of it in a good long while. I let my guard down because it was just beer, but I must've drank a whole lot. I don't even remember when I went to bed,” Kozakura said, mussing my hair.

“Your hair is a mess. Both of you. Did you go to sleep with it wet? Well, now's a good time—let's go for a morning bath.”

“O... Okay.” I replied reflexively, but, wait, go in that bath again? It felt like I had just been in there.

But it was true that my body was drenched with sweat, and Toriko's hair was a total mess. If I thought about it normally, it was clear we should go.

But still...

Kozakura got her stuff together, with no indication she knew we were hesitating, and cheerily said, “Before we got here, I thought one night would be fine, but now I'm glad that we went for two. What do you want to do today? We can laze around again, but I'm starting to think it might be nice to get out and have some fun in the area.”

Well... Whatever else happened, I guess I was glad that Kozakura was happy, at least. Because she was spared the terror that Toriko and I had gone through. If she'd been put through that kind of horrifying experience after we forced her to come along, I wouldn't know where to start apologizing.

But still, after an experience like that, we were staying another night in this place? Seriously...?

“Whoa, what is this?”

Kozakura cried out in surprise when she opened the door. We peered out from behind her, and gulped.

In the hall outside our room, there were a large number of slippers lined up, their toes facing our door, as if we had received countless guests in the middle of the night.

File 15: Overnight on the Otherside

1

In the later half of November, after the exam period ended, we were finally able to pick up our newly souped-up AP-1. We had it brought back to Kozakura's mansion again, and Toriko and I went there to listen to Natsumi's explanation.

"So, like I thought, it turned out an engine swap wasn't enough on its own. So, I started by replacing the whole chassis. I looked for junk parts from a combine harvester, and transferred over an entire set of tracks... It was a lot of trouble, let me tell you. I mean, I've never messed with any of this stuff before," she explained.

"I'll bet. It feels a lot more rugged now. Looks tough," Toriko, who was crouched next to the AP-1 and looking at the thick, rubber tracks, said out of admiration.

"Oh, it's tough all right. The movable track rollers will sink into the earth where the terrain allows it, which should make it a fair bit easier to drive over uneven ground."

Natsumi put her hands on the hips of her jumpsuit, and thrust her chest out. Her tone was brusque, but filled with pride.

"The engine used to be gas, but now it's diesel. It's a water-cooled, four-stroke cycle, three-cylinder engine. It needs diesel oil now, so make sure you don't get the wrong fuel."

"Got it." I nodded, examining the newly remade body of our vehicle. The engine—which had formerly been underneath a white cover on top of the treads on the right hand side—had been removed, and in its place there was a large engine straddling the left and right treads. It looked like, since we didn't need to drive over the ridges of a tobacco field, she had squished the space underneath and placed the engine there in an attempt to maintain balance.

"What kind of speeds can we get out of it?" I looked up and asked. The main reason I had asked Natsumi to mod the AP-1 was to remedy the fact that our transportation couldn't break three kilometers an hour.

"Your normal driving speed's about ten clicks. Top speed is fifteen."

"That's all?" I asked despite myself, and Natsumi gave me a cross look.

"Let me just tell you, ten clicks is fast enough that you're going to

fly off the front if you hit something. This thing doesn't even have proper seat belts, just these little ones you wrap around your waist."

"Oh, that's right."

"Yeah, you bet that's right. This thing's light, so if you wanted to, we could get thirty, forty kilometers per hour out of that engine. But you want to take it off-road, right? So we really shouldn't."

"About how fast is ten clicks?" Toriko stood up and asked.

"About what you'd go on a granny bike."

"Ohh. That slow, huh?"

"That's ten clicks off-road, okay?"

"Oh, that is pretty amazing, huh?" Toriko said, sounding surprised. Natsumi shrugged, as if to say, *You finally get it.*

Hesitantly, I asked, "So... How much extra do I owe?"

Natsumi scrunched her face up and thought for a moment before saying, "100,000 yen will do. For parts."

"Huh...? Is that enough?"

"Well, that is the number I originally gave you and all."

No, she was obviously taking a loss here. I had asked her to take on the job and waive the labor fees as a reward for our help with the Sannukikano incident, but now that I could see how major the modifications were, I felt bad.

As I stood there, wondering what I ought to do, Toriko, who was now sitting in the left-hand seat, spoke up. "I'll pay, too. The same amount as Sorawo. Does having double the money help cover it a little better?"

"Honestly, yeah, it does."

"Okay, we'll do that then."

"Thanks."

Since I was the one who brought up the idea to Natsumi, I had been intending to put up all the money myself, so I was a little torn. "Are you sure?"

"Of course. It belongs to both of us, after all," Toriko said with a grin.

That's when Natsumi interjected, looking a little miffed. "That's right. It's your car, so learn to maintain it yourselves, would you? If you totally wreck it, you can have them tow it to my place, but if you're taking it off-road, I think there'll be a lot of little problems..."

Toriko and I listened closely as Natsumi explained what to do in the event that we ran into mechanical problems. I was taking notes, but anything written in the surface world was impossible to read in the other world, so I needed to commit as much of it to memory as possible. It actually confused Natsumi that we were listening so seriously. But if the AP-1 broke down on the Otherside, fixing it could be a matter of life and death.

With her lecture concluded, Natsumi climbed into the driving seat of the truck she had used to come here. Seeming somewhat mystified, she said, “Still, this may be an odd thing to ask now, but after putting in a weird order like this... Where are you planning to drive it?”

“We’ve got a good place. No one goes there, so we won’t be causing any trouble.”

“Oh, yeah? Somewhere nice and out of the way, huh?”

“Yeah, sorta.”

“Hmm. Well, be careful out there, would you? If a bear shows up, the bear’s going to be faster...”

As we watched the Ichikawa Automobile Repair Shop’s truck go, Toriko and I looked at one another.

“A bear, she said.”

“I wouldn’t wanna run into a bear,” Toriko quipped.

“Yeah, my eye and your hand wouldn’t do anything to it...”

“We could at least try your eye, couldn’t we?”

“Even if it did do something, it’d just turn an ordinary bear into an insane one.”

I got into the AP-1’s right-hand seat, and turned the ignition. There was the initial whir of the motor, then a sputtering sound, followed by white smoke, and a satisfying *vroom*. Thanks to the new muffler, it felt quieter than the old gas engine.

“Okay, how about we take it out for a test drive?”

“Let’s go!”

We took the AP-1 into the other world through the gate Toriko had opened.

To the place where no one else would come, or be bothered by anything we might do—our playground.

2

We started our test run with the new, souped-up AP-1 right next to where we came out of the gate. We climbed up and down hills, and did donuts in the fields. Once we had gone through all the motions, we stopped the AP-1 by the gate, and cut the engine.

“Hey, let’s do something about these seats,” Toriko said now that it was quiet, sounding threatened.

“Yeah... Our butts are getting destroyed here...”

When we drove over bumps in these hard plastic seats, we were painfully reminded that there were hard, pointy bones inside our soft, fleshy bottoms. Natsumi had been right—when we were only going three kilometers per hour, all I thought of it was, *Oh, it’s shaking*. But when we were going ten clicks? That was a huge difference.

I got out of my seat and stretched my stiff waist. “Let’s go and buy

some cushions.”

“At an auto parts store?”

“I dunno. These are a lot smaller than a car seat.”

“I’ll settle for a floor cushion, or anything at this point... Let’s just find *something*.”

Whatever the solution was going to be, we had a vehicle for our next excursion now. Leaving the AP-1 behind, we rubbed our behinds as we headed back to the surface world. We spent the next three weeks buying a variety of things, and making other preparations.

We were able to solve the comfort problem with a pair of seat cushions designed for large bikes. There were cushions with gel in them designed for people who ride for long periods of time, and we found some that you tie to the seat using a belt that we were able to install on the AP-1. They were expensive, and when you include the ones we bought but couldn’t use, we’d blown 300,000 yen, which was a depressing thought for me.

We had talked about how it would be nice to have a garage next to the gate to store the AP-1 in before, but that proved surprisingly easy to accomplish. There were portable garages made of fabric and pipes, and it seemed like something we could assemble by ourselves.

I know I said it was surprisingly easy, but the kit still cost us about 400,000 yen. Once you factor in the ladder, crowbar, shovel, hammer, and other tools we needed, too, it was closer to five hundred thousand. The assembly was a lot of work, too.

To prepare for the task, we found a flat area near the gate, cut the grass there, and plucked it out by the roots to prepare the ground.

Next we had a big cardboard box containing the portable garage we had ordered online delivered to Kozakura’s mansion, and opened it up on the other side of the gate. Drawing lines on the ground with a measuring tape and carpenter’s square to make sure we got all the dimensions right, we dug deep holes at each of the four corners to put pipes into. We placed the connecting pipes between them along the long left and right sides, making sure that they were parallel. In order to keep the connection points from coming apart, we had to pound on them with the hammer, as well as flatten the metal pipes in a number of spots, too. This was already some pretty exhausting work.

With the two parallel lines on the ground finished, we put the other vertical pipes up along them. I held the pipes straight upright, while Toriko banged on the top of them with a hammer, using a piece of wood to distribute the force. Four on the left, four more on the right. Combined with the initial four in the corners, we had a total of twelve pipes of the same height.

Next, we ran arches over the top, connecting the left and right. The pillars were supposed to be angled slightly, and that tension was

what fixed the arches in place, so it required a little brute force. This part was really tough for the two of us to do. We struggled from the very first arch, and it was bad enough that, after talking about it, we decided we might be doing something wrong, so we headed back to the surface world for a bit to check out portable garage assembly videos on YouTube.

Once the six arches were in place, we installed the support beams for both sides and the center of the ceiling. The frame of the garage was fully assembled, and we were both so happy we could have screamed. We put the tent over top of the frame, and pulled it taut with stakes and rope. Finally, our garage was complete.

When we had met up at 10:00 AM, I had taken the task lightly. "We'll be done a little after noon, don't you think?" I'd said. I couldn't have been more wrong. It ended up taking a whole day's worth of work. But setting that aside, now we wouldn't have to leave our precious AP-1 exposed to the elements. The beer we drank at the end of that day tasted ridiculously good.

After that, we bought a metal storage shed, too.

Because the AP-1 was so tall and wide, we had ended up having to buy a portable garage meant for a minivan, but since it was also comparatively short, there was space left over inside. We decided to put the shed at the back of it.

I was going to order a smallish one, but I was shocked to find that even those easily came to two or 300,000 yen.

"That's expensive...! Huh? They really cost that much? It's just a shed, right? Okay, maybe it's weird saying it's *just* a shed."

"It's not a good idea to cheap out on something we're going to use. I mean, it's going to be outside, and we wouldn't want it leaking or getting rusty, right?"

"Well, no, but... I thought it'd only be six thousand or so..."

"That's way underestimating it."

This was the price without assembly or construction costs, so it was still cheaper than it would normally be. In other words, normally, when you buy a shed, there are workers who assemble it for you. But we had no choice but to handle that part ourselves.

"If we called Akari, I bet she'd be more than happy to help..." Toriko said. We were laboriously hauling the concrete blocks that were going to serve as the foundation through the gate.

"No."

"I thought you'd say that."

"No bringing in other people. This is just you and me. No telling them, either."

"Okay, okay. Don't get mad."

"I'm not mad."

We carried the heavy metal panels into the garage, worked ourselves into a sweat assembling them, but in the end we somehow managed to get the shed set up. I'd thought it might be, but it was pretty dangerous doing it by ourselves. I spent the whole time we were working worrying that we were going to injure ourselves or tear through the tent.

We emerged from the garage, covered in sweat, and collapsed onto the grass. I was staring idly into the sky, feeling the chill of the wind brushing against my cheek.

"We should've built the shed somewhere with more space, and then built the garage..." Toriko muttered.

"I know... Don't say anymore..."

The tools that we had used building the garage had just been left lying out up until this point, so we rounded them up and put them in the shed, then returned, exhausted, to the surface world.

"Yuck, I'm all sweaty! I need a shower!"

"You can go first, Toriko."

"Why don't we take one together?"

"Nooo. You first."

"Why not?"

I pretended to ignore the hurt look Toriko gave me. Ever since that time we went to the hot springs, Toriko had taken to saying this sort of thing occasionally. I had to wonder what she was thinking, especially when she was originally so reluctant to get in the bath together. I didn't mind getting in with her, but the way she invited me always felt pretty sketchy. If I took off my clothes in front of her, I could be sure she was going to start staring again, so I didn't want to.

In our regular trips in and out of the gate to work, at some point, it became customary for us to use the shower in Kozakura's mansion. Kozakura had looked unamused at first, but when we made a point of always bringing a gift, her attitude softened a bit, and she told us we could use it whenever we wanted.

"I haven't been blinded by the gifts, you hear me? I'm just relieved to see you two pick up some modicum of social graces," was what Kozakura said as she accepted a rather nice cake that we had bought in one of the basement-level food markets in Ikebukuro.

"So you don't need any more gifts, then?"

Toriko said more than she needed to, as always, and got a rant about how *"that's the problem with you"* that she could have avoided.

It had gotten more common for us to join Kozakura for a meal once we had freshened up in the shower now, too. Not that any of us cooked it, of course. We ordered pizza, Chinese, and other things. There was also a stock of cans of beer and chuuhai in the fridge that we had bought at the convenience store along the way, so we often

drank together, too. Toriko and I needed to head back before the last train, though, so we never drank all that much.

I felt like my impression of the dining room kitchen in Kozakura's mansion as this cold, desolate place was slowly falling apart. It felt lived in now, you could say... Though, maybe it was just getting messy.

Whenever she got some alcohol in her, Kozakura would talk about the hot springs. "That was a great trip, you know? The food was good, and maybe it's okay to be able to relax and soak in the bath once in a while."

"Uh, sure..." I agreed noncommittally.

"I wasn't interested in going to a hot springs hotel at all, but if that's what it's like, I wouldn't mind going again. Whether that's back to the same place, or trying a new one."

"Y... Yeah," Toriko said.

Whenever she brought up the topic, Toriko and I both stopped saying very much.

Kozakura still didn't know about the strange mannequins we had encountered on our way back from our late-night bath. That had happened to us on the first night of a two-night stay, so Toriko and I had spent the rest of our time there on high alert. Fortunately, there were no further incidents, so Kozakura was able to wholeheartedly enjoy the trip, even if no one else could. It hadn't been a bad idea for a trip, though, and I was glad that Kozakura didn't get caught up in what happened to us. But when I thought about what could happen the next time...

The other reason for it was a change in the way things felt between Toriko and me. That time, in the hot springs, when we were sitting shoulder-to-shoulder... Yeah, I think there really was something a little weird about us.

No, that's wrong. Toriko was being weird. Not me. Let's be clear about that.

"Sorawo, I love you."

Thanks. I'm glad to hear it.

"Your boobs are cute."

Hold up.

The way she ogled my chest as she said that shocked me pretty bad. I hadn't expected Toriko to be that brazen.

No, well, I didn't imagine that she was perfect—the way I had back when I first met her—anymore. Though she was beautiful, and seemed flawless, the way that she could be a real slob, laughed like a goof whenever she got embarrassed, and froze up when she didn't know what to do was pretty lame.

But still, wasn't what she said uncalled for?

I had been doing my best not to stare too hard at Toriko's naked body. It was just too beautiful. I felt like just seeing her living and moving was going to drive me crazy. But Toriko ogled me without hesitation...

The more I thought about it, the more I felt like Japan's culture of public bathing was insane. Why was it okay for us to be naked? Wasn't that nuts? Was it because it was fine if we were all the same gender? Was that a valid reason? Wasn't that logic... kind of breaking down here?

When I thought back to me and Toriko, gabbing away in the nude, my mind went blank. How had I been able to do that?

Frustratingly, Toriko seemed less concerned with what happened that time than I was. If anything, she had acquired a taste for it, and wanted to bathe together again. Even my repeated refusals hadn't deterred her. She was so brazen. It was almost like she thought I'd given her permission to get that close to me emotionally.

Well, no... I started to get worried. Maybe I had given her permission. Had I given her some sort of signal without realizing it myself? Was that why Toriko's attitude had suddenly gotten so weird?

But then again, Toriko was acting strange before that moment, too. When her eyes were darting around the changing room. No, it started even before that, when we decided to go on the hot springs trip, and perhaps even before then. Thinking back... Yeah, why was she sleeping naked that night in Naha? Because she was drunk? Was that all?

My train of thought fled from the recollection of Toriko's naked body, tracing past memories backwards.

In Okinawa, she'd made a big deal of praising my rather plain swimsuit... but when I praised hers, she got super shy... So shy that I felt embarrassed, too...

She had a Mom and a Mama...

She grew up in a house with two mothers that were married...

She ended up on her own...

Got enthralled with Satsuki Uruma...

Ended up on her own again...

...

It always took me a lot of courage to go the next step in this train of thought.

Maybe Toriko wanted to get even closer to me than I had been thinking...?

Sorawo, I love you.

I love you, too.

That's what I said... Without really thinking about it...

That had to be it, right...? After that, Toriko suddenly started

acting weird.

The image of Toriko as she gripped my hand so tightly it hurt, her eyes seeming to cling to me, was seared into my brain.

The mannequins appeared and prevented it, but if not for that interruption, what would have happened between us after that?

Whenever I thought that, my train of thought always came to a stop.

It became hard to breathe, I felt a clenching in my stomach, and my pulse quickened... This physical response that I had gotten so used to now made me aware of my own feelings.

I was scared.

Of Toriko?

No... That wasn't it.

I wasn't afraid of Toriko. Even if she was acting a little shifty, Toriko was still Toriko. My precious, irreplaceable partner.

What I was afraid of was not knowing how to respond to Toriko. When this woman who would follow me anywhere, no matter how dangerous, who was always with me, and who I could trust tried to get closer to me, how was I supposed to deal with it? I didn't have an answer.

I didn't have the knowledge. Or the experience.

I felt like I was a little child again.

Oh. I see now.

Looking at Toriko beside me with her flawless smile, I felt lonely, but also like I had realized something.

I'm a child...

3

In order to escape my worries, I immersed myself in preparing for the trip. I hung out at the outdoor goods store, weighing my options when it came to tents, sleeping bags, fire starting tools, and more. I bought things a little at a time.

I didn't have any proper experience with camping because, to be blunt, all I had ever done was some illegal trespassing and squatting in ruins. Toriko had gone camping long ago, when she was still little, so we were both starting from scratch and learning as we went when it came to learning how to camp and to gather the necessary equipment.

When I was at one store, crouching down in front of a glass case filled with knives, Toriko called out to me, sounding worried. "You're looking at those knives with a face like you've been driven into a corner and don't know what to do. You okay?"

"I was thinking we might want a knife."

I had read a number of books and magazines that provided an

introduction to camping, but most of the books had a section in their second half on how to use a knife and suggested buying a good one that cut well. After reading that a number of times, I started thinking we needed one.

Next to me, Toriko brought her face next to the glass. "Whoa, isn't this one cool? It says it's made of meteoric iron. That's iron. But from meteors."

Though I was unnerved by how her face was suddenly so close to mine, I still somehow managed to reply. "B-But it's stupid expensive."

"We can afford it."

"We have enough expenses as is."

"Hmm, but we really are going to want a blade, huh? We can use it as a weapon, too."

"A weapon..."

I tried to imagine myself swinging around one of the knives in the display case. *No, no... What am I going to fight? Sure, if I used my right eye, I think I could cut the monsters from the other world, but...*

It sucked that, upon remembering the time Satsuki Uruma grabbed me by the hair and I instinctively cut it to escape, I couldn't write the idea off as completely ridiculous. I got lucky that time, as I'd happened to have a knife that I had stolen from a cultist on me, but who knows what might have happened if I was empty-handed.

Still, an amateur like me arming herself with a knife wasn't realistic. I gave up on it and moved away from the display case. "I dunno. Maybe it's not for me. Even if I had one for self-defense, I'd probably panic when I needed to pull it out and end up cutting myself."

"How about something bigger?"

"What, you mean like a katana?"

"No, I'm thinking something more practical. Don't you want to hack through the underbrush or the tall grass?" Toriko said, demonstrating with a slashing motion.

"Ohh, you mean a nata hatchet."

"Yeah."

We had talked about it when we were building the portable garage. It took too long to mow the grass by hand, so we went out and bought a sickle. When we came back from the other world carrying a sickle and wearing gloves, Kozakura spotted us and said, *Could you do my yard, too, while you're at it?*

"Do you think we can walk around with a hatchet? It seems like it'd be heavy and it'd get tiring."

"We've got the AP-1, so we can just keep it there, right? I was half-joking about using it as a weapon, but I think it would be useful for splitting firewood and a whole bunch of other stuff."

“Hmm. That does sound useful, but... I think I’ll hold off on deciding for now. There’s a lot of other stuff we need too.”

“Okaaaaay.”

She accepted it so easily, like an obedient child; I gave her a resentful glare out of the side of my eye. *She has no idea what I’m going through here...*

“So, how are we going to start a fire? I was thinking that a gas burner might work.”

Toriko’s question brought me back to reality. “Well, I was planning on getting a fire starter, too, but a gas burner does seem like it’d be easiest.”

Our exploration kit had already included waterproof matches, but we had agreed we needed a more simple and reliable way of starting fires. When night came in the other world, we wanted to be able to avoid a situation where it was pitch-dark before we could get our campfire going. In addition to buying more matches, we picked up a fire starter set which consisted of a magnesium rod with an iron striker... basically, the modern equivalent of flint and steel. We would carry them on us as a last resort, but the gas burner was what we were going to use most of the time. Even slightly wet wood could be set alight if we fired a gas canister meant for a camp stove at it.

We needed all this firepower if we were going to overcome the task we had set for ourselves.

That task was to spend a night on the Otherside.

Up until now, we had been avoiding the night in the other world. Except for the few times we were thrown over to that side with no warning, we always went through the gate early in the afternoon, and returned in the evening before it got dark, like we were a couple of elementary school girls following their curfew. The night was scary. The other world was bright and empty during the day, but once the sun went down, it was full of bizarre sounds and presences. Back when Satsuki Uruma was still human, she had warned Toriko and Kozakura that night was dangerous and told them to avoid it. Based on my own experience, I had to conclude she was right.

But I also knew it shouldn’t be impossible to stay in the other world. There were indications that Satsuki had done so herself. Palehorse Battalion had also been able to stay in the other world for a long time after they got trapped at Kisaragi Station, even if they did produce a large number of madmen and Fourth Kinds in the process.

There was Abarato, too. He had stayed in the other world for several days searching for his missing wife.

Basically, what I’m getting at is that a night on the Otherside didn’t necessarily have to have fatal consequences. Not immediately, at least...

Only being able to operate during the day was a major impediment to our ability to explore. The biggest problem was that we couldn't travel long distances. We could only travel so far from the gates we knew—a limitation that had always frustrated me. I had put up with it when our only means of transportation was our own two feet, but now that the AP-1 was faster, and could travel further, the only way to expand our range was to set out into the night. That was what the camping goods, and the fire, were for.

On a Friday in mid-December, we set out on our final practice run.

We entered the other world through Kozakura's front yard and set up our tent next to the gate so we could flee at any time. It was a cute red tent that was large enough for both of us. Toriko had suggested an unobtrusive green, or to go in the opposite direction with raincoat yellow or fluorescent green instead, but I had pushed for red.

"It just feels half-hearted, you know? It doesn't work as camouflage, but doesn't stand out if we get lost, either."

"But it *is* cute. I want this one." From the moment I saw its picture in the catalog, until I set eyes on the genuine article in store, I was in love.

"You sure do love cute stuff..." Toriko said in exasperation.

"Oh? Do I? I think I'm pretty normal."

We piled up charcoal and firewood next to the tent and ignited the gas burner. The charcoal turned bright red under the burner's fire and burst into flames together with the firewood.

"We did it!" We clapped our hands and smiled at one another in relief.

Hunkering down next to the entrance to the tent, we waited for sundown. The western sky turned red starting at the mountain line, then gradually changed to purple.

For an instant, that purple became an incredibly deep blue. So deep it was nearly black. It was a color I had never seen in the surface world. I had seen the same blue when night came at the Beach of the End.

The sun set.

As we watched the skies, night came to the other world.

The field, which had been empty except for the sound of the wind through the leaves before, was now filled with the presence of living things. There was a rustling in the grass, voices that could have been either birds or people in the distance, indistinct whispers carried on the breeze, and a subtle white noise, like tinnitus or radio static...

"...It's about time, huh?"

"Yeah."

Standing up, we looked around the grassy field on which night

had fallen. If we were lucky, the “flag” we had set up would be visible, but...

“Well, Toriko?”

“Hmm, I don’t see it. Want to try going up on the hill?”

“I’d rather not go too far from the gate, but maybe that’s the only way.”

“If it looks dangerous, let’s bail right away.”

“Okay... I guess we’ll go, then.”

Remaining cautious of anything that might be approaching, we began climbing the hill to the east of the gate together. Every step away from our tent and campfire made me more uneasy. Fortunately, there were no glitches on the hill. We walked through the grass, relying on the stars to light our way.

It didn’t take long to reach the summit, providing us with a 360-degree field of view. We squinted and started looking around the area again. The mountain ridges and treetops were like shadow pictures on the starry backdrop.

Toriko was the first one to spot our “flag.”

“Found it. Isn’t that it over there?” Toriko said.

Looking in the direction Toriko was pointing, there was a line of light far off in the darkness, stretching straight up towards the night sky.

That was the “flag” we had raised.

“Oh, good. It was close enough to see.”

“Can you tell what direction it is?”

I looked down at the compass, glowing green due to its luminous paint. The unreliable needle shakily pointed...

“It’s roughly... northwest, I think?”

“We haven’t been that way yet, right?”

“Nope.”

“So...?”

I looked back at Toriko, then nodded. “So we’ve got our first destination. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Before embarking on our first long-distance trip, we talked it over and decided we needed a destination. If we just wandered around randomly without direction, there was a good chance we would run into trouble. That was why we would set another gate as the destination, in order to ensure we had a way out if we couldn’t turn back.

For that, we used the Farm.

We had discovered multiple gates at the Farm that were connected to places we didn’t know. After deciding on one that seemed reasonably safe, we would raise a flag there that would be

visible from a distance. Then we would reenter the other world using the gates at Kozakura's mansion and in Jinbouchou, and if the flag was somewhere we could see, we would set it as our destination. That was the plan.

The first thing that came to mind was a physical flag. I thought if we got one of those expandable/retractable plastic poles that they use at events and in front of stores to put up banners, then put a flag on the tip of it, that would be a good, cheap solution. But once I found out that those poles were, at most, three meters long, the idea had to be thrown out. They weren't going to be of any use at that height.

The next candidate was one of the poles that people fly carp streamers from on Children's Day. If we got a large one, it would be visible from a distance, and if we actually used a pennant as large as the ones they use for carp streamers, it might stand out pretty well. I think it was a good idea, but this one got rejected, too. The reasons were cost and the hassle involved in setting it up.

While there were some pretty large poles out there, they easily cost over a 100,000 yen, and required a solid base on the ground. That meant having to dig a deep hole to install a receptacle for the pole, which was a whole lot of work. If we tried it at one gate, and we couldn't see the pole we had set up, we would have to try it again at the next one, and we didn't have time for all that busy work.

That brought us to our next plan, which was using light. The light from a searchlight was visible from a distance, and we wouldn't have to worry about the wind knocking it over like a pole. I worried they would be too expensive when I went looking, but I was surprised to find we could actually afford one.

Hand-held miniature searchlight: 16,000 yen.

Portable 24-volt power source: 30,000 yen.

...Sure, that was still expensive, but even if we couldn't use those two items as a flag, we would probably have other uses for them while we were exploring, so I went out and bought the stuff. If we attached a 2,000 yen timer switch to them, we could make them light up automatically right at sunset.

We entered the other world through one of the gates at the Farm and installed the searchlight. Our first choice was next to a river, with nothing around to obstruct our view of it. There was a rocky area with large stones lying around by the riverside, and we found a flat rock the size of a table there, so we climbed up on top of it, and set the searchlight there pointing straight up.

Once the timer was set, we returned from the other world to the Farm, then went through the Round Hole to the DS Lab in Tameike-Sannou. Then, taking the roughly hour-long trip to Shakujii-kouen, we passed through the gate at Kozakura's mansion and went back to the

other world.

If you consider how much effort all of that took, we were lucky that we were able to see it with the first gate we tried. The DS Lab was close to Jinbouchou, and the skeletal building let us look out over a wide range, so that would have been a better spot for spotting the searchlight, but we were practicing camping on this side tonight, too, so it worked out well that it was visible from the gate at Kozakura's mansion.

As we watched the pillar of light, there were three short cries, like those of a pheasant, from some undetermined direction. The wind blew in from the east, making the grass at our feet sway like the hair on our heads.

"Let's head back," I said, and Toriko nodded, holding her hair in place with her hand.

We both hurried down the hill, back to our tent, and stopped at the campfire. The warmth of the fire was reassuring, but the darkness outside grew deeper and deeper, and it looked terrifying.

We went inside the tent with our shoes still on. When we pulled the zipper on the entrance down, it was almost pitch-black inside. I fumbled for the switch on our LED lantern, and it filled the tent with white light.

There were two sleeping bags laid out for us on top of an insulating mat on the floor of the tent. We had chosen envelope-style sleeping bags with a zipper on the side, just in case we needed to get out of them in a hurry. They had been advertised as being usable in winter, too, so if we put a blanket over top of them, they would be more than warm enough.

With our pillows inflated, and the sleeping bags ready, Toriko gave me a troubled look. "What should we do with our shoes when we get in our sleeping bags?"

"Hmm... I guess it's safe to take them off, right? Let's leave them somewhere where we can put them back on quickly."

"Gotcha."

We took off our shoes and laid them at our bedside, and then got into the sleeping bags with our clothes still on. I turned off the LED lantern, and the tent was dark once more. Only a faint outline of our campfire shone through.

"Well, good night," I said, and Toriko responded in a whisper.

"Do you think we'll be able to sleep?"

"What else can we do?"

"I mean, it's not even 6:00, right? In the evening..."

Toriko was right. Even though we were in our sleeping bags, I didn't feel even the slightest bit sleepy. If anything, the tension and excitement were keeping me wide awake.

I adjusted my pillow, trying to find the best position for it. "We sleep when the sun goes down, and wake when it rises. That's what humanity's always done."

"That was before we had fire, right? Even primitives stayed up later than this."

If this were a normal camping experience, things might have gotten more exciting once it was dark out. Everyone eating curry together, singing by the campfire, playing games inside their tents, and talking until they fall asleep... Not that I'd know what that's like. Still, that wasn't going to happen this time. This was our first night in the middle of the other world.

"We have to stay quiet, you know? There's no telling what might happen, and we need to run right away if things get dicey."

"I still think going to sleep at 6:00 is overdoing it. Can't we stay up a bit longer?"

"If we leave the lights on and make noise, we won't be able to notice if something weird comes our way. I'm pretty sure Abarato-san must have laid low at night, too."

"Here we are, camping out alone together, and we can't do more to enjoy it? That's no fun," Toriko said sullenly. Even in the dark, I could see her pouting. I had noticed this in Okinawa, too, but when we were in a situation where you would normally play around, but Toriko wasn't able to, she got super upset about it.

"We're alone together all the time."

"But this is our first time camping out!" Toriko corrected me, her voice sounding sulky. Was that important?

"Well... As long as we're not too loud, I think it's okay to talk."

"Okay. Let's talk, then." Toriko moved closer, sleeping bag and all.

"Quietly, okay? Quietly."

"You got it," Toriko said in a hushed voice. It sounded like she was enjoying herself. The sudden change in attitude made her earlier sulking seem like a lie.

When it comes to things like this, she's always more childish than me...

Just as I was thinking that, Toriko said something that made her sound like a kid in elementary school.

"We should've bought snacks. Do we have anything?"

"Snacks...? If you want CalorieMate, or some hard candies, we do have those..."

"Open 'em up. There's tea, too, right? Where'd we leave the vacuum flask?"

"I think it was over... Hey, wait, this isn't a field trip, okay...?"

"Oh, it's fine, it's fine."

As we were sipping at the steamy tea and munching on the snacks that were supposed to be our portable rations, while speaking in

whispers about what equipment we should buy next, and where we should have the after party, the campfire finally burned out, and it was completely black inside the tent.

As we each strained to hear the other's whispers, at some point, we had gotten so close we were almost touching. I could feel Toriko's leg touching mine through our sleeping bags and blankets. The moment I noticed it, I instinctively pulled away.

Maybe she was surprised by sudden motion, because Toriko stopped talking. For several seconds, silence fell, and, laughing a little, Toriko asked, "Huh...? What's up?"

"N-Nothing. I just... wanted to change positions."

"Oh. Okay. Did it hurt?"

"Nah, I'm fine."

Once that oddly evasive exchange was over, Toriko fell silent again. I panicked. When I moved just now, it wasn't because I didn't like her touching me, I was just surprised, and moved reflexively.

Before I could blurt out something to that effect, Toriko suddenly whispered, "It's getting cold, huh?"

"Huh? Oh... Yeah, I guess it is."

Now that she mentioned it, I was feeling chilly. I think that with the heat of the fire gone, the air outside actually was colder.

"So... These sleeping bags, they've got zippers, right?"

"...? Yes, and?" I replied, not grasping what Toriko was getting at.

"I was thinking, they're the same model, aren't they?"

"Yeah, we bought them together."

"Maybe we could zip them together, and make one big sleeping bag?" the woman lying next to me in the darkness suggested in an incredibly calm, relaxed tone of voice.

"..."

"What do you think? Sorawo."

"..."

"Sorawo?"

I was so close I could hear her whispering, but I still couldn't tell what sort of expression was on her face as she said that. In all our other idle banter, even if I couldn't see her with my eyes, I'd been able to tell exactly what expression she was making, even as it rapidly changed from moment to moment.

I took a deep breath, and carefully replied, "That might be possible, yes."

"Do you want to try it?" Toriko asked without hesitation, and I felt forced into a corner.

"N-Now?" I managed to squeak, and I sensed Toriko nodding.

"I'm sure we'll both feel warmer that way."

Her whispers were so close I could feel her breath. In the

darkness, I couldn't even move an inch. I knew the longer I took to respond, the weirder things were going to get, but I was frozen solid.

Not long ago, I might have felt confused, as well as shaken up. And yet, despite some grumbling, I'd have ultimately done as Toriko said. But now, I didn't feel like I could do that at all.

Something.

I needed to say something.

Anything would do. *"Let's save that for when it's light out,"* or, *"I'm warm enough,"* or, *"It's too much hassle."* Anything.

The sound of my own gulping was awfully loud. Maybe Toriko heard it, too. I felt her body stiffen in the darkness. Feeling desperate, I opened my mouth.

"It's—"

"Shh!" Toriko exhaled sharply.

"...Huh?"

"Shh! ...Listen."

Now that she said it, I finally noticed.

There were footsteps.

Someone's footsteps on the grass, approaching us.

There was a sound like metal and leather brushing against each other, and I realized Toriko had gone for the Makarov under her pillow.

"You think... they're alone?" I asked.

"Sounds like."

The footsteps came up to the tent, then stopped. I felt like I heard a slight breathing, but no voices beyond that.

How long did they stand there? Suddenly, the footsteps started moving again. They changed direction, circling the tent once. Then, without stopping, circled it again.

The footsteps didn't stop again. Round and round, clockwise, they continued doing loops around the tent.

"This seems safe," I whispered quietly.

"Huh?" Toriko was dumbstruck. "Are... Are you serious, Sorawo?" I nodded.

"It's creepy, but I think we'll be safe if we don't go outside. This happens all the time in ghost stories set in the mountains."

"It happens all the time..."

The beings of the other world tried to drive people mad with fear. That was easiest to see with the ones at Kisaragi Station, but they didn't tend to try and cause direct harm.

Well, no. There were some dangerous exceptions to that, like the Ninja Cats, and the Kotoribako, but... at the very least, after a while, I could say that the footsteps circling our tent showed no sign of changing, so I was convinced this was just that kind of "phenomenon."

I don't even know how to describe how I felt when I noticed I was actually relieved by this.

I knew this fear. I could handle it. I reached for my pillow, too. When I felt the cold metal of my Makarov, I settled down.

I grabbed the blanket which had slid down and pulled it back over my sleeping bag.

"Let's go to sleep."

"Wh-Wha... You're kidding me, right?"

"I think it'll actually be safer if we go to sleep, so we aren't conscious. Let's sleep."

"Do you think we *can* sleep...?"

It felt tense not knowing what might happen, and I was still uneasy. Though I was trying to act tough, I didn't think I was going to be able to get to sleep that easily, either.

I twisted around in my sleeping bag, huddling closer to Toriko of my own accord. There was an audible gulp from her. I wasn't going to link up our sleeping bags' zippers, but I was probably fine with us sleeping close together like this.

"Good night."

"Go... Good night."

Toriko snuggled up closer to me, and I felt her breath on my forehead.

Soon enough, my body, which had been cold, gradually warmed up.

Surprisingly, and I was genuinely surprised by this, both of us drifted off to sleep in no time at all.

We both woke up, practically at the same time, to the sunlight shining through the fabric of the tent, and the chilly morning air.

Our faces were so close they were almost touching. We both blinked repeatedly, then jumped up.

"It's morning!"

"We fell asleep!"

When we tried to get out of our sleeping bags, I noticed. We each had the zipper open on just one side, and we were holding hands through the openings. We must have been squeezing really hard for a long time, because my fingers ached horribly.

It looked like we had done some skillful maneuvering in our sleep, and also been really, really scared.

Falling asleep while quivering in fear in bed, and the next thing you know, it's morning. That's another common trope in ghost stories, I analyzed, as if the whole situation had nothing to do with me. Maybe people were just surprisingly good at sleeping in the midst of terror. Though, it could be more accurate to say we passed out.

When we opened the tent door, the chilly air came in with the

morning light.

Even with the blurry sun of the other world, the sunlight shining on the other side of the hill was plenty bright.

Nothing was out of the ordinary outside. If someone had really been circling our tent all night, there should have been some trace of them, but there were no tracks, no items left behind—nothing.

“We made it through the night, huh?” Toriko said. I simply nodded in agreement.

AP-1, check.

Tent, check.

Campfire, check.

Destination, check.

Camp, check.

That was the practice run over and done with.

Now, it was finally time for the serious exploration to begin.

4

The day we chose for our first long-distance expedition was a somewhat misty Tuesday as the year was about to come to a close. The weather forecast said there was a fifty-percent chance that the urban core was going to see its first snow. It was pretty cold.

“What? You’re going today? Of all days, today?” Kozakura said dubiously, furrowing her brow, when we dropped by to give her our regards before setting off.

“I know it says there’s going to be snow, and that does worry me a bit,” I admitted.

“Snow... Well, yeah, there’s that, too.” Kozakura glanced over to one of her screens. The clock displayed in the corner said it would soon be noon.

“But snow in Tokyo is never anything to write home about anyway.”

“Ohh, now you’ve gone and said it. If someone from Akita, and someone from Canada manage to get stranded in the snow, I’m never going to let you hear the end of it,” Kozakura said teasingly. Then, readjusting her attitude, she continued. “But hold on, the snow on that side might be different, right? If it piles up, you’ll have a serious problem on your hands.”

“By the same token, it’s also dubious whether this side’s forecast applies to the other world. I took a peek in the gate just now, and the sky was clear in every direction, so I think we’ll be fine,” I said.

“You just casually pop in and out of bizarre places. I really don’t like it.”

“We’re doing everything we can to prepare, so we’ll be okay,”

Toriko piped in.

“Well... If you’re both okay with it, then fine,” Kozakura said in resignation, leaning back in her chair.

“We’re heading out now, so do you want to come see us off?” I asked, but Kozakura slowly shook her head.

“I’ll pass. When I do things I normally wouldn’t, I feel like it sets an event flag, and I don’t like it.”

“Is that how it works?”

“You two can just run off like always, and come back the same as ever. When should I expect you? Tomorrow?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Okay.” Kozakura looked back to the monitor, not even glancing in our direction anymore. “Take care. And try to be careful... Seriously.”

“Okay. Later.”

“We’ll be right back.”

Toriko and I walked out the front door of Kozakura’s house and then through the gate to the other world, as usual.

The sky in the other world was faintly cloudy—the same as it was in the surface world today. The wind was blowing in from the northwest, and it was pretty cold. If someone told me it was about to snow, I’d probably agree, but the air didn’t feel that humid, so it probably wouldn’t accumulate—that was the sense I got as someone who grew up in snow country.

We took the AP-1 out of the portable garage and loaded the equipment for our expedition—which was in storage—onto it: a folded-up tent, sleeping bags, a toolbox, shovel, crowbar, waterproof sheet, rope, bottles of potable water, and a bundle of gardening poles we could place as guideposts. With our backpacks and two assault rifles hanging somewhere we could get our hands on them quickly, we were ready to head out.

“You’re not forgetting anything, right?” Toriko asked, taking one last look inside the portable garage. I pointed to each item in my luggage as I checked it was there.

“I think I’m good.”

“Okay. I’m pretty sure I am, too.”

We checked the direction one more time, then boarded the AP-1. Riding it felt a lot better now with the new seat cushions. I started the engine, and turned the body towards the direction we were heading, then looked at Toriko, who looked back at me.

“All right... Time to set out.”

“Go! Go!”

The new and improved AP-1’s rubber treads trampled the grass as we started to move forward.

The AP-1 was originally meant to work in the fields, so once it got going, it could continue at a constant speed without stepping on the accelerator. But this was the other world—the ground wasn't level like the fields on a farm. It was bumpy, with big ups and downs. That's why I needed to watch our direction carefully and make little course corrections to keep us from flipping over.

There were also glitches to watch out for on top of that, so it was a lot to manage. I looked ahead with my right eye, then we both threw bolts to check that it was safe and occasionally set up a gardening pole as a guidepost. There was fluorescent tape wrapped around the tips of the poles, so we would be able to see them in the dark if we shone a light on them.

I think we set out at around 1:00 PM. The first hour breezed by. If we took the vehicle specs Natsumi gave me at face value, we'd have already gone ten kilometers, but with all the detours and slow downs, I have to guess we'd gone seven, maybe eight at best.

The vibrations were making my butt hurt, and my concentration was fraying, so we decided to take a break. I found an old vending machine covered in ivy standing on its own and parked the AP-1 next to it.

When I turned off the engine, silence returned to the other world. Because the AP-1 was the only thing here that made a lot of noise, the recoil when it stopped made this place sound incredibly quiet.

"Whew."

"Hah. This is pretty tiring, huh?"

We got out of our seats and stretched and drank some water while we rested for a while. In between sips from her bottle of water, Toriko pressed her face up close to the vending machine.

"Aww. It looks like it's broken."

"It's well beyond just 'broken.' The thing's a wreck. Geez."

From what I could see of it through the vines, the cans on the other side of the yellowed plastic were sunbleached to the point they were almost completely white.

"But still, if there was a working vending machine here, wouldn't you want to buy something, just to see what would happen?"

"I get where you're coming from, but even if we could buy something, there's no way I'd drink it."

"In that case, we could sell it to Kozakura, or—Oh! I know, we brought a crowbar! How about we bust this thing open?"

"It's not shining in my right eye, so it's probably just a piece of debris."

"Aww..."

"No, don't 'aww' at me. If there was a swarm of bugs when we opened it, you wouldn't like that, would you?"

“Yeah, you’ve got a point. I wouldn’t.”

Though she wasn’t happy about it, Toriko gave up on the idea.

It’s not like I wasn’t curious, but our goal this time was to open up a new route. There were places of interest dotted around the other world, but we couldn’t stop and investigate every single one of them. It’d never end.

Putting the lid back on my bottle of water, I turned to look back the way we had come. We didn’t know how far it was to our destination, so we were being as conservative as possible when placing guideposts. There was only one that I could see from here. It was a yellow marker next to the tracks left by the AP-1 as it crushed the grass.

“Hey, Sorawo, what do you want to name this road?”

“Huh? Isn’t Route 2 good enough?”

“Let’s give it more of a proper name. Route 1 was fine because it was the first road we made.”

“Okay, then you come up with something, Toriko,” I said, unable to be bothered doing it myself, and Toriko just sort of stared at me in confusion.

“Me? You’re okay with that?”

“I have no sense for names. Come up with a good one.”

“Okay...”

I wasn’t all that invested in the outcome when I said it, but Toriko put a hand on her chin and started thinking seriously. Wait, was it that big a deal?

After around a ten-minute break, we started moving again. This time, we traded seats, so Toriko was in the driver’s seat on the right, while I sat on the left.

Suddenly, it hit me that Toriko was being awfully quiet. “The name can wait. You need to focus. If the AP-1 hits a glitch, we’ll be calling this the Road of Tears and Distracted Driving, or something like that. Got it?”

“But that sounds awful.”

“I don’t care how it sounds, so long as it makes you regret it every time we come through here.”

“You’re mean!”

We continued across the grassy field, taking occasional breaks, and swapping drivers whenever we did. Our route twisted and turned a little because we detoured around rocky areas and forests, but we followed the compass in a more or less northwesterly direction.

“It hasn’t made much of a difference over the short distance we’ve traveled, so I didn’t think much about it, but this shaking worries me over longer distances,” Toriko said, glaring at the swaying compass needles. “We’re aiming for roughly the middle of the needle’s swing,

but I think that's going to take us further and further off course. It was a good idea, using the searchlight, but it's kind of inconvenient that we can only see it at night, huh?"

"Well, yeah. We're going to have to come up with something that works during the daytime, too."

"We should build the highest mast we can, and fly a flag from it, right?"

"I don't care what we use, so long as we can see it from a distance, but there's limits to what we can do with a physical pole... It'll fall over if the wind is too strong, but if there's no wind, the flag won't flap, and we won't be able to see it."

"What if we got something lighter than the ones for carp streamers? You were telling me about it before, remember? That festival in Akita where they hang a bunch of lanterns from bamboo poles..."

"Akita Kantou?"

"Yeah, that's the one. You use some *loooong* bamboo poles in that. They probably hold up well in the wind, too."

"Can we buy something like that...? What would we do for the flag?"

"Stick a mirror on the end. Or wrap reflective film around it. I bet we could see the reflected light from a long way away."

I was impressed, and looked back at Toriko, who seemed proud of what she'd come up with.

"You sure are smart, Toriko."

"Really? Aw, shucks," Toriko said, tilting her head towards me. "Give me a pat."

"...Huh? Are you a dog?" I said despite myself, confused by the sudden request.

"If you won't pat me, I'm gonna rub your face, Sorawo."

"Whaa..."

My eyes darted about for no good reason. There was nobody here to see us. Obviously. On this grassy field, yellowed in winter, there was only me and Toriko.

Honestly, I might have almost felt reassured if Satsuki Uruma was still standing there. But now, I had only two options. Pat Toriko's head, or have her rub my face.

"Ngh!" Toriko shook her head, urging me to do it. How brazen. Having no other choice, I put my hand up, then placed them on her golden locks.

"...Good girl."

"Good. That's the way to do it," Toriko said once I gave her a perfunctory petting.

...*What, who made you the boss?*

I withdrew my hand, not sure what to make of this, and Toriko returned to her previous position. Then she resumed throwing bolts, as if nothing had happened. Except now she had a satisfied smile on her face.

I looked down at my hands, feeling left behind. Was that the right thing to do? I had been wearing gloves, so the lingering feeling in my hands felt awfully vague.

5

It was 4:00 PM. The sun hid behind the thick, low-hanging clouds, leaving the area around us a little dark. In another hour, it would set entirely. If we were going to camp, we needed to find a place to set up our tent soon.

The AP-1 was descending the slope into a depression surrounded by hills on all sides. The grass had been torn up, exposing the bare ground, and there were piles of trash on it. In the middle of household garbage like snack boxes, and disposable plastic bottles, there was larger trash like a broken CRT TV, old tires, and a dresser covered in stickers from a children's program. I could see a silver light deep inside the mountain of trash, making it easy to guess that this was some sort of glitch. Other glimmers suggested there were more items with aberrant properties mixed in with the garbage.

We took a route around the trash pile while talking about coming back to dig through it later. Then, as we looked back in the direction we were headed, which was the opposite side of the depression, we both gulped.

We could see the silhouette of an animal on the ridge ahead of us. It had straight legs, like a herbivore. I thought it was looking our way, but it didn't move at all. It just stood there, the gray sky at its back.

I engaged the brakes. Next to me, Toriko picked up the binoculars and looked through them.

"Can you see it?"

"...I can. I don't think it's alive. Probably."

Toriko handed me the binoculars, so I looked through them, too.

She was right. It wasn't just not moving, it was frozen solid. The texture of the body didn't look alive, either. I didn't know if it was stone or metal, but it looked inorganic. *What animal is it modeled on? I wondered. Is it a sheep, or a cow? I can't make out the head, so it's hard to figure out what the silhouette is supposed to...*

"...Ah!" I nearly dropped the binoculars.

"Sorawo?"

Toriko looked at me suspiciously, noticing something was up. I couldn't respond.

“Sorawo, what’s wrong?”

“Ku—”

“Ku?”

“It’s a Kudan...”

“No way.” Toriko snatched the binoculars away from me, and took another look. “...You’re right. Creepy.”

Lowering the binoculars, Toriko looked over at me, saw how stiff I was. “You want me to go on ahead, and take a look?” she asked considerately.

I shook my head. “...I’ll go with you.”

“All right.”

Toriko picked up her rifle, and checked that it was loaded, then laid it on her knee. I started the AP-1. The engine got louder, and we began ascending the hill out of the depression.

When we reached the ridge line, there was a Kudan statue there. It had the body of a calf and the face of a person. I had been preparing myself for it to be my father’s face again, but it was vague, not looking like anyone’s face in particular. This wasn’t a stone or bronze statue. The figure was plastic, and the paint was stripping. Its feet were rooted to a concrete slab, like something you might see at a playground in a park in the countryside.

“Sorawo, look.”

When Toriko called my name, I was finally able to tear my eyes away from the Kudan statue. For the first time, I saw the scenery beyond the ridge.

There was a road at the bottom of the grassy slope. It was paved. There were guard rails along the road, and beyond them it dropped off, and there was a river.

“It’s a river!” I raised my voice despite myself. If this river connected to the one on the other side of the gate at the Farm, that meant we were getting pretty close to our goal.

We decided to leave the creepy Kudan statue alone, and headed down the slope.

When we got closer, it became apparent that the road was fairly old. Grass grew through the cracks, and there were noticeable potholes. The road snaked alongside the river, heading more or less northeast.

We got down out of the AP-1 and looked around the area. I put my hands on the guard rail and looked over the edge. This side had a concrete levee, dropping straight down into the river. On the opposite bank, there was a river beach, with uneven round stones all over it. The current was decently fast and flowed from the northeast.

“We set up the searchlight on a beach like that, didn’t we? You think the place we’re going is on the opposite bank, maybe?” Toriko

asked, observing the far shore.

“Could be. If so, we’ll have to cross somewhere.”

“In terms of direction... Uhh, which way should we be heading?”

“It should be upstream, I think. Though, I feel like that’ll take us a bit further away from it, too.”

We looked up at the darkening sky. The wind had gotten colder, and that forecast for snow was sounding more and more realistic.

“We could give up for today, and pitch a tent. Or...”

“Or we could bet it’s not far now, and keep on going, right?”

The searchlight wasn’t set to turn on until after sunset, so we didn’t know how far, or in what direction, our destination was. That made this harder to decide.

“What should we do?”

It was a waste of time to overthink it. I broke free from my hesitation and spoke up. “Do you mind if we keep going? I think we can put up the tent without the pegs in five minutes. If it gets dark, we’ll still be able to take shelter quickly.”

I had anticipated this sort of situation, so I bought a tent with the flysheet and inner tent combined so that it could be set up in a short period of time. My decision wasn’t made purely on the fact that it looked adorable or anything.

Toriko furrowed her brow. “Theoretically, sure, it might be possible. But in an emergency, when we’re flustered, we’ll make mistakes.”

“I wouldn’t do this if I was on my own, but if you’re there to watch, that puts me at ease. If I mess something up, you’ve got my back, right?”

Toriko blinked as if she were surprised. “I’m happy that you... trust me like that, but...”

“But?”

“Oh, fine. I’ve got your back. Leave it to me.”

“I’m counting on you.”

Our AP-1 raced full speed down the riverside road as darkness approached. Natsumi was right: 25 kilometers per hour was nothing to make light of. Even in its current state, this was still a paved road. The rubber tracks spun quickly, crossing cracks and potholes. There was occasionally the glint of a glitch, but visibility was good here, so there was no risk of missing one.

After driving for about ten minutes, there was a change in the scenery. Buildings began to appear on both sides of the river, and the number of them gradually increased.

Ashen gray ruins, covered in rust and grass. The way they had so many identical windows facing onto the river made me think of a housing complex, or a hotel. Their fire escapes were rusty, with the

paint peeling, and they had even collapsed in many places.

The river snaked along, overlooked by ruins on each bank, and turned towards the northwest. That was the way we had originally been headed. Feeling a little relieved, we were able to chat casually about how one ruin or another looked like it'd be worth exploring, and we should come back some time.

Then...

"Sorawo, stop!"

I engaged the brakes as Toriko's shout echoed. There was something lying on the road up ahead.

"A person...?"

The white limbs cast across the asphalt looked feminine. We got down from the AP-1, and approached cautiously, with guns drawn.

It wasn't human.

The creature had the body of a woman, clad in a thin kimono, and the head of a calf. It wasn't moving, nor did it show any sign of breathing. It was strangely glossy from the top of its head, to the tips of its unsettling toes, and even the kimono it was wearing.

Toriko tried throwing a bolt, and it bounced off with a loud *clink*.

"...The thing's made of glass," Toriko said quietly.

It was a monster with the face of a cow, and the body of a woman. A cow woman.

No, it wasn't even that, it was a glass sculpture. There, lying on the road.

"What is this thing?"

I had no answer to Toriko's question. This made no sense to me. But if we were seeing this right after the Kudan statue, it seemed unquestionable that something was happening, and I was the target...

"Sorawo."

"What?"

"You okay?"

I looked down, following Toriko's gaze, and realized at some point I had wrapped my arms around myself, with my hands grasping my upper arms, and was I shuddering. Unconsciously, my grip got stronger, and even with conscious effort I wasn't able to loosen it.

Once I managed to let go of my arms, and was able to look down at my quivering fingers, there were white flakes in the palms of my hands.

It was snow. Little snowflakes fluttered down from the deep gray sky. The dry snow looked almost like ash.

That was when the sun hidden behind the clouds set. I could feel a sudden change in the air. It felt like the babbling of the river, which we had been hearing all this time, stopped for an instant.

There was a gust of wind down the slope on our right, which

faced the road. The road along the river darkened as we watched, the last lingering light of daytime fading fast.

At the same time, there was a light in the corner of my vision, and we both looked left. On the opposite side of the river, to the northwest, there was a pillar of light rising.

“There it is!”

That was our searchlight. It was close, too! Even eyeballing it, I could tell it was only a kilometer, maybe even less. If we hurried, we could make it there. But...

“Of course it’s on the opposite shore...” I ground my teeth. “Sorry, looks like we might have to pitch a tent here after all.”

“...Here?” Toriko said in a low voice, looking at the glass figure lying on the road. She looked both ways, and then walked over to the guardrail, and leaned over it to stare intently upstream.

“Wh-Whoa, that’s dangerous, Toriko.”

Toriko turned back to look at me as I tried to stop her, then pointed upstream. “Over there. Look.”

“What?”

I did as Toriko suggested, and leaned out to look.

Beyond the gentle leftward curve in the river, I could see some sort of lattice structure. It wasn’t possible to make out the details from here, but it looked like it continued from the road out over the river...

“A bridge!” I shouted as it hit me.

“Looks like it. Let’s keep on going!”

We jumped on the AP-1 and took off at once.

Giving the glass figure of a cow woman a wide berth, we picked up speed and raced down the road without streetlights. At this point, I realized something pretty important. We had no headlights!

While I swore that, if I made it back in one piece, I was definitely going to install some lights, Toriko pulled out her own flashlight and turned it on. I could see snowflakes dancing across the ring of light on the road.

The snow was building up as we watched. Our AP-1 left clear tracks in the thin, white, ash-like snowflakes covering the asphalt.

In the northwest, the pillar of light flickered out. That was my fault for cheaping out on batteries, and setting it to go out after only a short time. Shoot... I should have made it stay on for an hour, at least.

“Things might be bad over on the right. Prepare yourself before you look,” Toriko said in a tense voice. I turned to look, and gulped.

There were a number of four-legged silhouettes on the slope. Kudans. They weren’t statues this time. Their bodies heaved with each breath, their feet shifted, their tails swayed... They were alive. The whites of their eyes stood out awfully well on their shadowed faces. Staring at us. With human eyes.

“Huh?! Just now...” Toriko cried out in surprise, snapping me back to my senses. Her eyes were wide, and she was looking behind us.

“What’s wrong?”

“There was someone... walking.”

“Huh?!”

I turned to look despite myself. It was so dark back there, I couldn’t even see the tracks the AP-1 had left behind it.

“Wh-What were they like?”

“It was a woman. Like the one we just saw...” Toriko trailed off for a second, then shouted. “There she is again!”

My eyes snapped back to the front. This time, I saw her, too. A woman, next to the guardrail, stumbling along, wearing nothing but a red kimono. Her steps were unsteady, and little horns protruded from her head. As we got closer, I smelled rust.

It was the cow woman.

We both stared vacantly, unable to react as we drove past. Soon, she was swallowed up by the darkness.

“Was... Was that her?” Toriko asked.

“I think it was the same one as before,” I replied.

As we drove on in confusion, once again, the woman in the red kimono appeared ahead of us, on the left.

Her kimono hung open, her limbs were too pale, she smelled of blood, and she had the head of a cow. Exactly the same as before.

The AP-1 passed the woman again, and again, and again. Gradually, the rate of her appearances sped up. I had a feeling the number of bovine shadows with human faces on the ridge to our right were increasing, too.

“We’re still not there?!” I cried out in disbelief, unable to hold it in anymore. If that thing we had seen earlier was really a bridge, it probably should have shown up by now. “Could we have gone past the bridge?”

“We can’t have. I’ve been looking the whole time,” Toriko said, never taking her eyes off the left side of the road. “Do you see anything with your eye, Sorawo?”

“I’ve been looking for a while now, but... I don’t even know.”

There’d been no new developments for over ten minutes now. If anything, the situation was degenerating. More and more, I questioned my own sanity. We were driving down a road to nowhere, with only a single flashlight to light our way.

“This is getting bad, isn’t it?”

The more time passed, the more terror crept into Toriko’s voice. Not good. I already felt like I was losing it, but if they got Toriko, too, we were finished.

I pulled out my Makarov, and leaned towards Toriko.

“Sorawo?”

Taking aim at the back of the cow woman up ahead, I pulled the trigger. A muzzle flash lit up the darkness. The cow woman’s head was thrown back, as if she had been pushed from behind.

I took another shot from the moving vehicle. My bullet struck the cow woman in the side of the head.

She crumpled, vanishing behind us.

“...Was that okay?” Toriko asked, and I shook my head before answering.

“I dunno...”

The AP-1 raced onward as we held our breaths, not knowing what might happen next.

Eventually, a familiar sight appeared up ahead.

The cow woman collapsed on the road, her red kimono hanging open.

She wore the same outfit as before and had fallen the same way. The only thing that had changed was the texture. She didn’t have the glossy appearance of glass, but didn’t seem soft and limp like a corpse would be, either.

A Kudan stood next to the cow woman, as if nuzzling up to her. Its head was lowered, lapping at the corpse’s blood.

Can we run it over? Does this thing have the power to do that? The idea crossed my mind, but... I gave up on it.

If I got carried away and ended up damaging our precious AP-1, that would be pretty terrible.

Seeing no other choice, I stopped the AP-1.

The Kudan stopped licking the blood, and slowly raised its head.

“Wahhh?!”

“Eek?!”

We both screamed.

The face of the Kudan that looked up at us, covered in blood from the nose down, was mine.

6

Toriko and I both froze, our guns still aimed at the creature.

My face was attached to the body of a cow, with messy hair, and clouded eyes. I felt my mind retreating from that corpse-like gaze and the saliva dripping from bloodstained lips.

Its mouth opened, and spoke.

“The Red Person,” my voice said. “The Red Person came.”

Oh, I see.

I listened to my own voice as if in a daze.

I'm forgetting.

Who was the Red Person again?

"Do you really have to go? Is it not too soon?" I said.

"I told that person, too. It is terribly unfair, would you not agree?"

I shook my head in distress.

"I must light a fire to welcome them. If I do not feel heat and pain, it will not be fair." I nodded, and—

Gunfire echoed, blasting a hole in my forehead.

Letting out what seemed like a sigh, I lowered my face, and crumpled to the street.

"...Uh." I blinked, as if waking from a dream.

There was a thin puddle of blood, like someone had thrown a balloon filled with it at the ground, and the Kudan and the cow woman were nowhere to be seen.

I looked beside me, and Toriko was holding her AK, looking at the puddle of blood in dumb shock. Smoke rose from the muzzle.

"Sorry, Sorawo. I-I shot it," Toriko said, stumbling over her words. "I just... I couldn't take it anymore."

I wanted to say something, but I couldn't get the words out. Instead, I shook my head. In between quivering breaths, Toriko slowly lowered her gun.

I noticed a vague brightness around us, and looked up. At some point, we had ended up in front of a ruined building. Light from a neon sign turned the snow pink and blue. It was missing letters, and emitted an insect-like hum. Even if it hadn't been broken, we couldn't have read it. Text from the surface world was indecipherable in the other world.

I couldn't hear the river anymore. Looking around, the snow covered fields and empty lots stood out. It was like we were at a dilapidated roadside building in the country. The neon sign shone cold and alone in the vastness of night, without a single streetlight to keep it company.

Based on the privacy wall in front of the building, and the list of prices, as well as the green vinyl curtain covering the entrance to the parking lot, I concluded that this ruin had to have been a love hotel.

And yet, I knew this hotel.

"We weren't here before. What's going on...?" Toriko held her AK close to her, wary of her surroundings.

"I dunno, but... do you remember the building we went inside that time with the Yamanoke?"

"You mean the observation platform?"

"Every time it turned, the other world changed a bit, right? I think something like that's going on here."

"And what it brought out was this, uh... hotel?"

“Sorry, this might be my fault.”

“Huh... Why?”

Though it felt a bit awkward, I told her, “I think I know this place.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve been inside.”

“...What do you mean?!” Toriko’s eyes were wide.

I couldn’t read what the sign said, but one glance was enough for me to remember it. On that day, I had been lured in by the neon sign, too.

During my high school years, when I didn’t want to go back to my house because it had become a hangout for cultists, I went from one abandoned building or ruin to another, searching for a safe place to hide.

One day in winter, the place I found was a love hotel in the suburbs. The building was pitch-dark, and clearly abandoned, but the neon sign was still lit up for some reason. Figuring it must not have been long since they went under, I went inside.

Only the sign was getting electricity, because none of the lights worked. Though the first floor had been torn apart, once I smashed through the plywood that was blocking the stairs to the upper floors, those were untouched. Wandering through the cluttered, dusty building with a flashlight in hand, I found a relatively intact room near the emergency exit, and decided to settle in there.

Then, after staying for a time, I went back to my house.

When I gave that simple explanation, Toriko looked up at the neon sign, her face filled with emotion.

“Oh, yeah...? So this is a place from your memories, then...?”

“W-Well, I guess you could say that.” I winced a bit when she summed it up using words that were prettier than the reality of the situation.

“Huh? But hold on. Is it possible we ended up here because I shot that thing?”

“...There’s no point worrying about it. I have absolutely no idea what the logic behind it is.”

A gust of wind blew past, chilling our bodies which were sweaty from terror, and tension. Toriko shivered, and looked up to the starry sky. Dancing snowflakes looked beautiful in the neon light.

“I feel like the snow’s getting heavier.”

“Yeah...”

“What do you wanna do? Put up the tent here?”

I considered it.

When we wandered into a different aspect of the other world and encountered the Yamanoke, we were able to go back to where we

came from when the revolving observation platform returned to its original position. Would the same happen here when time passed? Or was there some condition we needed to satisfy?

After encountering the Time-space Man, when we came back from a deep place in the other world, we were able to open a direct path home using my eye and Toriko's hand. I looked around with my right eye to see if there was anything that would let us do that again, but there was none of that silver shimmer that we could use as a starting point.

It was too dark, and too cold to try anything else. Even if this was a different aspect of the other world, surely morning would still come. In our current situation, now that we had lost sight of the bridge we were heading towards, it was probably best to shut out the outside world, and sleep until it was bright out. But I was too scared of the snow to try pitching a tent outside. I didn't know how much would fall, and if we were exposed to the wind, that would make it really cold.

I looked to Toriko, who was waiting for my response with a tense look on her face. "Want to try going inside?"

"Inside?"

"The love hotel."

"The love hotel?!" Toriko shouted out, like she had lost the ability to do anything more than parrot words back at me. I nearly burst out laughing.

Okay! We're doing it, Toriko!

We're going to a love hotel together!

But sorry... This love hotel is an abandoned ruin...!

I held the light and Toriko held her AK ready as we peered behind the green vinyl curtain. There was room inside for five cars and all the spots were empty.

Now that we had checked it was safe, I got back in the driver's seat and drove the AP-1 inside the parking lot. Meanwhile, Toriko kept a watchful eye on the surrounding area.

Once I turned off the engine, it was suddenly very quiet. Our footsteps echoed through the little parking lot lit only by flashlight.

With no power to the automatic door that led further inside, we got out a long crowbar, stuck it in a gap, and forced it open together.

Putting the heavy long crowbar back on the AP-1, we grabbed our respective backpacks and sleeping bags, and got ready to explore. I took a handheld crowbar that could double as a nail remover, and hung it from a tool belt at my waist along with a bag full of bolts. Toriko was even more incredible. She had a serious two-handed ax with a leather sheath attached to the outside of her thigh.

"Can you use that?"

“I’ve chopped a lot of firewood. That was when I was still a kid, though.”

“No, but still, you don’t need one that’s that big, do you?”

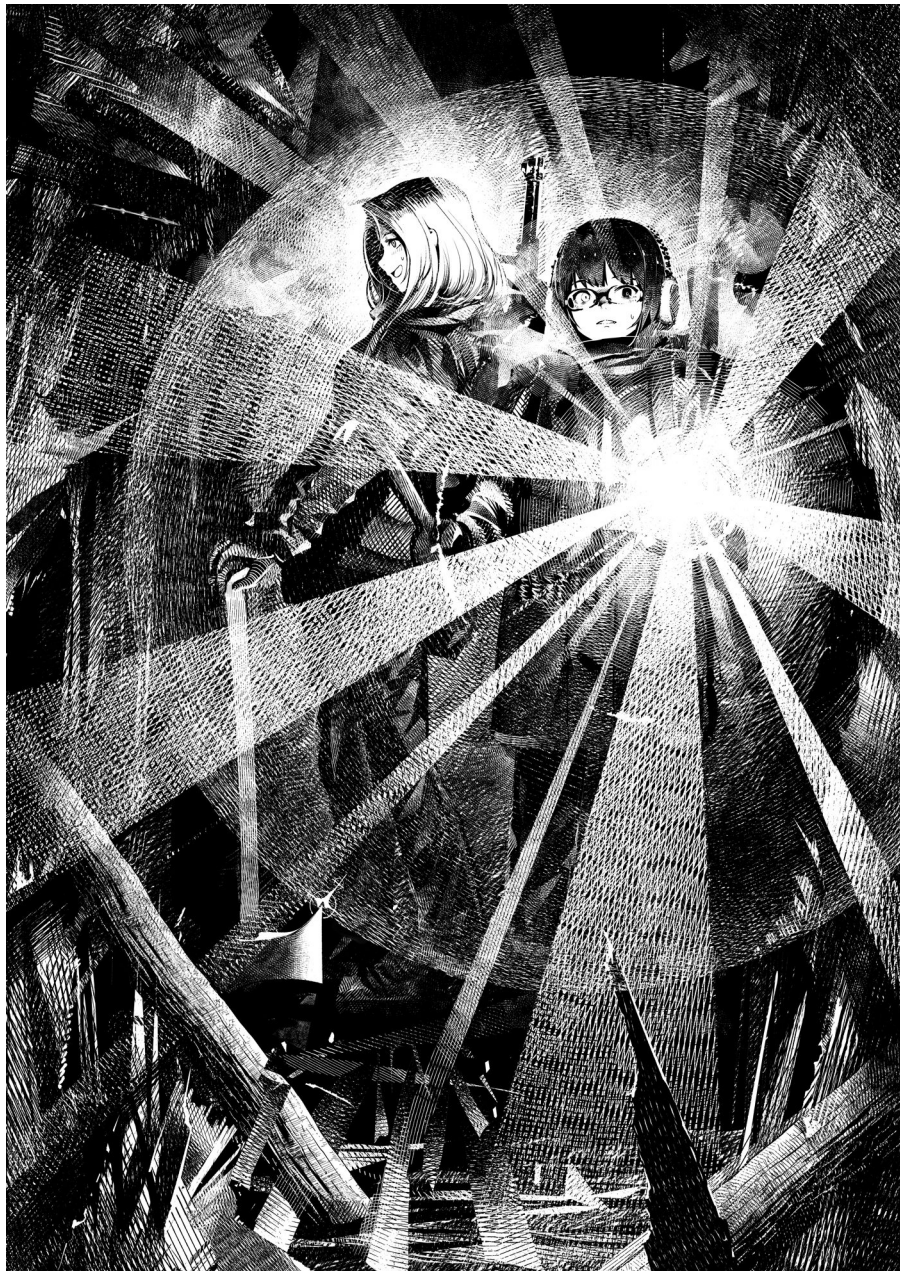
“For someone my height, one this long is actually easier to use. Don’t I look good with it?”

“It’s not a matter of whether you look good with it or not... You do, though.”

“Oh, good. They say ‘An ax makes a woman look beautiful,’ after all.”

“I’ve never heard that before?!”

Regardless, with our preparations complete, we went inside the hotel.



I proceeded down the hall with an assault rifle on my back and a flashlight and a Makarov in my hands. We soon came to a stonework lobby. It was cold and empty, and the panels that guests would have used to choose a room were all dark. Shards of shattered vases and dried up bundles of flowers littered the floor. Using my crowbar to pry open the door to get behind the front desk, I headed behind the privacy panel. I looked over all the keys to the different rooms on the wall until I found one that had a different key holder from all the rest.

“There. I think this is it.”

“What’s that?”

“The master key. I hear every hotel has a key that opens all of the rooms.”

Once I explained that, Toriko’s eyes sparkled.

“Wow, Sorawo. You’re really used to this sort of thing, huh?”

“I don’t think it’s anything praiseworthy, but... I’ve done it a lot. That was when I was still a kid, though.”

That was only three years ago, max.

Besides, I’m still a kid now...

“Is something wrong?”

Whenever I was feeling down, Toriko noticed. But I couldn’t do the same myself, you know...

I sighed. “Let’s go. We’ll find a decent room and get some sleep.”

“O-Okay.”

With the elevators out of service, we decided to use the employee stairs. Like when I had come, they were sealed off with plywood. I was about to use my crowbar to pry the way open, but Toriko stopped me, and unsheathed her ax, breathing wildly through her nostrils.

A dreadful snapping and cracking echoed through the whole hotel, and then the way upstairs was open.

“Sorry... Didn’t mean to make so much noise...”

“...Well, what’s done is done. The way’s open now, at least,” I said, trying to assuage Toriko’s feelings, then cleared what remained of the plywood and started climbing.

When we reached the second floor, there was a cold draft, as if a window had been left open somewhere, so we kept going. The third floor was in pretty good shape, so we decided to search for a place to sleep there.

“I hear there are people who have girls-only parties,” I said, and Toriko looked at me dubiously.

“What’s this about?”

“Girls’ parties at love hotels.”

“Oh...”

“It’s a lot like what we’re doing, I’ll bet.”

Toriko slowly shook her head. "I think it's totally different."

We both sounded confident, but we weren't in a good place mentally. At an unfamiliar place in the other world at night, with no idea as to where we were, it would have been weird if we weren't feeling at least some degree of psychological strain. Though I was doing my best not to dwell on it, I had no idea what was up with this building we had wandered into. It was clear this wasn't the "place from my memories," exactly. Just very similar, as if someone had created a highly accurate replica by reading my mind.

What the hell? Why does a building like this exist? If I thought about it even a little, I was going to go insane.

As I kept the doubts that were constantly trying to surface at bay, we went around opening rooms with the master key, and clearing them. We ran into broken furniture, mold on the walls and floors, and leaky ceilings, but after a number of misses, we finally hit a good room. It looked undamaged, and if we could just overlook some dust, it was perfectly livable. Being halfway between the employee stairs and the emergency exit was also convenient if we considered that we might need to flee.

There was a bath to the left of the entrance, and on the right was the door to the toilet, and a sink. Water had been cut off, though, and the TV obviously wouldn't turn on. I tried taking a look inside the fridge, but it was empty. No amenities to speak of. I wouldn't have touched them if there were, but when they weren't there, I still felt like I was missing out on something. But that was fine. So long as I had this big bed that dominated the center of the room, that was good enough for me.

However, though I had thought I would be fine with my sleeping bag and the blankets from the bed, an unheated hotel in the winter was colder than I imagined. Even if there wasn't any obvious damage to the interior, this place was still a ruin. There was a persistent draft coming from somewhere. We put our larger things down next to the bed and headed out of the room for a bit. Using the flashlight to light up the wall near the elevator, we were able to find a keyhole. It needed a different type of key than the master one we had, so I slid the end of my crowbar into a gap in the wall panel, and pried it open. Inside was a shelf, and it was packed full of linens.

Heading back and making the bed with the sheets and pillow covers we had acquired, we also piled up the blankets we had collected. With all of these, we probably wouldn't freeze to death.

We lit up an LED lantern and put it down on the glass table. Then we boiled water with a camp stove of the variety that used gas canisters. Considering how bad the draft was, we didn't need to worry about carbon dioxide asphyxiation.

Pouring boiling water into a seafood flavor package of Cup Noodle, I waited for two and a half minutes. I just knew instant ramen was going to taste way more delicious in the other world than it did in the surface world.

When I had finished eating, I boiled more water to make instant coffee. A sip of steamy coffee, with some salty youkan jelly as a snack, and I was finally able to settle down.

“See, this is already starting to feel like a love hotel girls’ party,” I said, but Toriko stubbornly shook her head.

“It’s absolutely not.”

“I mean, we came to a love hotel, ate, and chatted, right?”

“It’s different, okay? This isn’t a girls’ party.”

“What would you know about girls’ parties, Toriko?”

“More than you at least, Sorawo!”

“Oh, yeah? Is that right? Well, let’s hear it then, what are girls’ parties like?”

“Well...”

For the next little while, we argued back and forth about what the girls’ parties that people who were not us went to were supposed to be like. Neither of us had any experience, or knowledge, so it was an argument that could never amount to anything.

“Fine, then when we get back, let’s go to one! Not in a stupid ruin like this! To a real love hotel girls’ party!” I said on the spur of the moment. Toriko nodded.

“Okay.”

“Then you’ll see what... Wait, what?”

“Fine. Let’s go. For real. I mean, I’ve never been to one, either.”

“Are you serious?”

“You’re the one who brought it up, Sorawo.”

“Sure, but...”

“Then let’s go. To a love hotel girls’ party. You eat honey toast and stuff, right? Not that I’d know.”

“Well, I only know what I’ve seen online...”

“When we get back, let’s schedule something, and go. I’ll be looking forward to it.”

“S-Sure...”

Huh...?

Paying no heed to me as I fell silent out of worry, Toriko let out a yawn.

“I’m getting sleepy.”

“...I guess we should sleep.”

We took off our coats and shoes, and got under the covers. There were already plenty of blankets, so we didn’t need to use the sleeping bags. Each of us took three blankets for ourselves, then we pulled the

large comforter attached to the bed over us.

We decided to turn the lantern down, but leave it on. I checked that my gun was in reach, then lay my head on a pillow.

“Good night.”

“See you in the morning.”

I could feel the Cup Ramen and coffee warming me up from the inside. Thanks in part to exhaustion, I was asleep in an instant.

7

How much time had passed? Suddenly, I thought I heard something, so I opened my eyes.

The room was quiet and freezing cold. In the white light of the LED lantern, nothing seemed to have changed from before we went to sleep.

I heard it again. A slight electric noise—like a chime.

“Toriko.” I shook the mass of blankets next to me. When I did, the lump in the blankets collapsed without resisting, spreading out across the bed.

Oh, I see, I thought. Toriko must have had something to do and got out of bed while I was still sleeping.

Getting up, I put on my shoes. Then, as I shivered in the cold, I slipped my arms through the sleeves of my coat.

I moved away from the bed, looking for Toriko. The bathroom was dark and dry. Knocking first, I looked inside the toilet, but Toriko wasn't there.

Where did she take off to? I wondered with some concern when I heard a faint chime again.

That's when it hit me. Silly Toriko must have left the room without thinking about it. The auto-lock trapped her out there, and now she was ringing the bell, trying to get back in.

There's just no helping her. Geez... I laughed to myself, then undid the chain and opened the door.

A chill wind blew in from outside.

There was a Red Person standing there.

Far taller than I was, and looking down at me.

I felt a sense of nostalgia welling up inside me.

I remember that time.

When I was all alone, you asked me.

“Do you not need those people?”

When I went home after that, they were all gone.

I don't know if you did something, or it was a coincidence. But that night, in the abandoned building, you saved me.

I'm glad to see you again. What's up?

I smiled, and the Red Person bent over slowly, and hugged me.

It felt incredibly soft and warm, just like that time.

Huh?

Why didn't I start the fire?

Well, they never came home.

Are you mad?

I got the kerosene ready and everything. Just like you said to.

I know I didn't dump it over my head. But I didn't want to get wet.

Besides, if they weren't coming back, it didn't feel like there was any point to doing it.

Don't be angry.

Huh?

"Do I not need that girl?"

What girl?

...

I need her.

I really do. I need that girl.

I need her, so you can't take her away.

You can't, got it?

She's special.

Huh?

A replacement?

I don't need a replacement.

She's the only one I need.

It's fine, you don't have to watch.

You don't—

Suddenly, my vision shook.

I was no longer standing in a dark corridor, but on a field in the middle of the day.

I knew this place. This was the sports field at the elementary school I'd gone to.

Why am I here again? School's not out yet. If I don't go back inside, they'll get mad at me.

I looked around in confusion and spotted a rusty iron door in the corner of the field.

It was built right into the concrete ground, and when I pulled on the handle, I was able to open it even with my elementary schooler muscles.

Inside, there was a ladder leading down. Even when I was in elementary school, I had always loved exploring unfamiliar places, so I excitedly began my descent.

Once I reached the bottom, there was a hallway with an iron mesh floor. I could hear water running beneath my feet. Immediately, I started walking forward.

However, the corridor soon came to a dead end. I had only gone maybe twenty meters forward. An iron grate blocked my way, and a ladder on the wall led upwards.

Is that all...? I thought, disappointed, and climbed the ladder, opening the hatch to go outside. For some reason, it came out in the same place I had gone down. What was more, it had been noon just a moment ago, but now the sky had turned to evening colors.

Scared, I ran towards home. The familiar scenery along the way seemed *wrong* somehow. Here and there, unfamiliar buildings replaced the ones I knew, and something was off about all the road signs and other signs along the way.

When I arrived home, out of breath, it was strange there, too.

Where our garden tree once stood, there was a tall cactus sprouting a bright red flower. In our garage, there was a compact sports car. The intercom had been replaced with a little lever, pointing downwards. It had a plain wooden handle, with some sort of small black symbol on it. Two cow-like statues with human faces looked down at me from next to the front door.

This was supposed to be my house, but... Confused by the chaotic scene that seemed to demand I find all the things that were wrong with it, I walked around behind it. Peering in through the kitchen window, I could see my father and grandmother speaking happily at the low table in the room that held our family's Buddhist altar.

I thought that was weird because normally, Dad wouldn't be home yet at this time of day. Grandma was wearing a sea blue kimono that I hadn't seen before, too.

Something resembling a doll was lying on the table between them. It was like my Licca-chan, or a Barbie doll, but far prettier. They were talking about what to do with it, and even though I hadn't been given it yet, I worried they were going to take it away from me.

That's when I heard footsteps coming down the stairs, and my mother entered the kitchen. I couldn't see her face from where I was, but she looked the same to me as she always did.

Relieved, I called out to Mom from the window.

At that moment, something felt very wrong to me.

Mom was supposed to be dead.

After her death, Dad and Grandma went nuts.

That's why I ran away...

That's how I met that girl, and how I'm here now.

So, was that Mom?

If she was real... then what was I?

Time seemed to stretch out as Mom noticed my voice and slowly turned to face me.

I can't look.

There'll be no going back.

I'll lose something precious to me.

I knew that instinctively. And yet, I couldn't move. Still staring through the window, as if frozen, I couldn't take my eyes off my mother as she was about to turn around.

No.

Toriko.

Toriko, save—

In the next instant, there was an incredible crunching sound, and the whole world went dark.

“Sorawo!”

Someone grabbed me from behind, and I tripped as they violently pulled me backwards.

I stared up at the ceiling, confused, and found myself in the dark hall of a hotel. In the light of the LED lantern shining out through the open door, a disheveled Toriko had wound up to take another swing at the Red Person with the ax she was carrying.

“Toriko! Wait!” I shouted despite myself, clinging to her leg.

“What?! Let go, Sorawo!”

“It's not what you think!” I cried out in desperation. *“That's the Red Person!”*

“What's not what I think?!”

“It's the Red Person! It's the Red Person, so it's not what you think!”

Toriko looked at me with murder in her eyes. Her left hand reached out, grabbing me by top of my head, and forcibly turning me to face the Red Person.

“Take a good look! There's no way this guy's harmless!”

“B-But it's the Red Person,” I kept complaining, and Toriko finally lost her temper.

“Don't judge based on appearances! Who are you gonna trust, Sorawo?! This guy, or me?!”

With just those words, it was like the scab that had grown over my perception was torn off. Reeling after the first blow from the ax, the Red Person's mouth hung open, as if yelling something at me. It was pitch-dark inside it. Like the soot from a fireplace.

“Wha... What the hell is this guy?!” I shouted.

“You awake now?!”

“Yeah... Yeah, I am!”

I was practically screaming.

Had I let this monster hug me without question because of fond memories?!

Past thoughts rushed back into my head.

This guy tried to make me douse myself with kerosene and commit

suicide by burning myself to death!

Now that I finally realized it, I was shocked by the fact I had never found it strange before.

“Pull yourself together, Sorawo! You need to look at him! With your right eye!”

Once Toriko said that to me, I was able to regain control of myself. I focused on my right eye, and glared at the Red Person.

If he'd just tried to kill me, that'd be one thing.

But, no—that wasn't enough. He tried to take Toriko from me, too.

“Okay. I'm looking right at him,” I said in a suppressed voice. Because if I spoke any louder, my emotions would get out of control, and I'd have ended up shouting out loud. “Kill him good, Toriko.”

“I'm on it!”

Toriko took the ax in both hands again.

The heavy steel blade tore through the air with a low-pitched whoosh, burying itself deep inside the Red Person's body.

There was no scream. Repeatedly and without mercy, Toriko brought the ax down on the enemy caught in my vision.

An ax makes a woman look beautiful.

It sure does, I thought.

Ash flew in place of blood as the Red Person was hacked to bits. The severed limbs that fell to the hallway carpet were like burned-out husks, with embers lingering in the severed edges, but trampled under Toriko's hiking boots, they vanished in no time.

Breathing heavily, Toriko lowered the ax and looked back at me. “You okay? Can you stand?”

I clutched her hand and pulled myself up, then was immediately overcome with incredible nausea. Doubling over, unable to speak, I puked on the Red Person's remains.

Even once there was nothing left in my stomach, the gag reflex wouldn't stop, and it took a while before I realized Toriko was rubbing my back.

How long had that Red Person been deceiving me? The thought of it was maddening.

This meant that ever since back in high school, when I met him in that ruin, he had been messing with my perception. Even when he appeared at my apartment door, I paid no mind to it. As if it were natural for him to be there.

Now that Toriko had saved me, I stumbled back into the room. She offered me a glass of water, and I rinsed out my mouth at the sink. My reflection in the mirror showed my face was a mess.

“Sorry, Toriko. I'm so sorry. I never realized I—” I started to say in a voice that was hoarse from vomiting, but Toriko put a finger to

my lips.

“Shh. Just rest for now. We can talk in the morning. Okay?”

“Yeah...”

Maybe because I had just experienced a memory from my school days, I nodded like a child. No, that’s not it. That was a false memory. It never actually happened...

At Toriko’s suggestion, I took off my coat and shoes, and got back into bed. Toriko sat next to me, patting my head as I lay there. *It’s usually the other way around*, I thought as I felt her gentle hand stroking my hair, and I gradually calmed down.

But I couldn’t sleep. When I closed my eyes, that scene came back to me. Vividly. Mom, about to turn around...

The terror I felt in that moment was hard to put into words. I shuddered just remembering it. Not because Mom was scary. I loved her, and was devastated when she died. The memory of how much she cared for me was often what kept me going in the hard times that followed.

But I was truly terrified then. I knew that if our eyes met, everything would break down, and there would be no going back. Of all the terrors I had come to know since learning about the other world, I had never been more frightened than in that moment. Just imagining the thought of seeing her eyes made me want to scream.

What if that wasn’t a fabricated memory, but something that actually happened? What if, even if the world was slightly distorted because this was the Otherside, that had really been Mom?

What if our eyes had met, we spoke, and I went into the house?

What if that wasn’t an illusion the Red Person was showing me, but there was a world within the shifting aspects of the Otherside where my mother, who I thought was dead, was actually alive?

What if there was a world where my father and grandmother never fell in with a cult because of her death? What if I was presented with the possibility of the four of us living together as a family?

Would I have been able to stay the same as I am now?

There would be no place for this “me” in that alternate Kamikoshi family.

I mean, obviously, their me would be happier. The other me who had never experienced betrayal by her own family, madness, and an onslaught of malice. If she lived a peaceful life, full of happiness—she’d be a completely different person.

Most of who I was now had been desperately scraped together from the pieces left after my mother died. Therefore, I was convinced that if I caught a glimpse of a possibility that might upend that foundation, it would shake me to the core.

I could try to explain my fear, but it didn’t make it any less scary.

If anything, my head became a mess, and my mental state deteriorated even further.

“Urrrrgh,” I groaned and clutched my head. As nails dug into my skin, and I pulled my hair, I realized that pain could rob me of the power to think.

“Don’t do that, Sorawo. You’ll go bald.” Toriko grabbed my hands and tried to stop me. I brushed her off, and sat up.

“Sorawo...”

I looked at Toriko, who seemed so concerned. “Toriko, slap me.”

“Huh?! Why?!”

“If I keep thinking, I’m going to go crazy. Please.”

“You... You want me to hit you?” Toriko sounded shrill. I shook my head in frustration.

“Anything that brings me back to my senses will do! Come on!” I shouted, then shut my eyes tight and braced for the pain.

Honestly, anything would have been fine. If she didn’t stop at a slap, and just straight out punched me, I would have welcomed it. I wanted a strong sensation that would wipe out the mess currently filling my head.

I know you. You get upset when I call it domestic violence, but you really like slapping me. You were really into it when you chased out the Yamanoke, and you’re kind of weird any time you start rubbing my face. But, whatever, I can forgive it. You’re Toriko. So hurry up and—

I sensed Toriko moving. I cowered reflexively, and a hand touched my left cheek.

It was followed by a hand on my right cheek. Slowly, gently.

Stop it. That’s not what I want. You need to really haul off and whack me. Don’t you get it, Toriko? I’m halfway to going mad right—

Something soft touched my lips, and my mind went blank.

Ki...

My eyes opened involuntarily. Golden eyelashes were right there, ready to kill them, so my eyes hurriedly slammed themselves shut again. But in that instant, I completely understood the situation.

Toriko had my face cupped in her hands, and she was kissing me.

Beautiful people always smell good. It’s just not fair, I grumbled internally, remembering my own exhausted face from the mirror. *She’s got some nerve. Thinks she can get away with this just because she’s beautiful, and her lips are soft. Does she eat nothing but lip balm three times a day?*

“Mmph?!” I was shocked to feel something wet through those soft lips.

Wha?! She slipped me the tongue!

I struggled, reflexively pulling away. I couldn’t stop her.

“Hah!”

Once our faces separated, Toriko let out a violent laugh. That fierce, unrelenting smile was so beautiful, I just stared up at her, forgetting to protest.

"How was it?" Toriko asked, her face triumphant, defiant, and scared.

"How about... you tell me first," I said, not entirely sure what I was asking. Toriko licked her lips, and looked upwards and to the side as she mulled over it.

Don't savor it, you dummy!

I thought her face had suddenly loosened up a bit, then, unable to hold back any longer, burst into a massive grin.

"Ah-hah!"

I was taken aback by her sputtering laugh. "What the hell?!"

Her lips quivering with laughter, Toriko came right out and said, "It tasted like puke!"

"...You jerk!" I shouted, and Toriko broke up. She clutched her belly and collapsed on the bed.

"You're the worst! I'm done! I'll be sleeping on the sofa! Goodbye!"

"Sorry, sorry. Don't go."

As I tried to get out of bed, Toriko stopped me. "E... Even if you smell like puke, I'll put up with it, so..."

The rest was lost in another gale of laughter. If something tickled Toriko's funny bone, she'd be at it for a while. She fell back into bed, still holding me, and this time wouldn't let go. I let her hug me from behind for a while, a scowl still on my face.

"Whew... Okay, I'm sorry."

"Geez, what's even going on...?"

"But, hey, you're back to your senses, right?"

Like the ends justify the means.

"...Thanks to you," I replied begrudgingly.

The impact of that kiss had blasted the terror that had seemed so deep-rooted clear out of my head. It was all gone now.

"I'm glad it was me," I murmured unconsciously.

I'm glad it was this me here today.

I lost my Mom, and went through hell, but just being able to meet Toriko was enough to make life satisfying.

Honestly... I couldn't imagine living without her anymore.

"Huh? What'd you say?" Toriko asked, and I repeated myself angrily.

"I said I'm glad it was me! There are people who would flip out if you did that to them out of nowhere, okay?"

"That's all right. I wouldn't do it to anyone but you, Sorawo." That one nonchalant comment was enough to torpedo down my pitiful

attempt to fight back.

“Hey, turn this way.”

The moment I reluctantly turned to face Toriko, she hugged me as hard as she could. She patted my head like crazy, and mussed my hair.

“H-Hold on.”

“Sorawo, I love you. You understand that, right?” She whispered into my hair, as if speaking to my roots. I struggled with myself for a moment, then took a deep breath.

“I know. What do you think I am?”

“...My—”

“We have the closest kind of relationship in the world, right? You said it yourself, didn’t you?”

This time, Toriko hugged me tight without a word.

“...That hurts,” I protested.

“...”

“Hey!”

Oh. Wait, am I supposed to hug her back, maybe?

By the time I realized it, it was apparently too late, and Toriko had already loosened her grip on me, satisfied.

Under the mountain of blankets, we stared at one another for a time. Then, unable to take Toriko’s sparkling eyes staring into mine any longer, I quickly surrendered and closed my eyes.

“Good night.”

“See you in the morning.”

Before I fell asleep, I noticed that, at some point, we had started holding hands. I didn’t even think of letting go.

8

The next morning, we opened the shuttered windows, and a fresh coat of snow covered everything beneath the clear skies.

“Wow! It’s all white!” Toriko exclaimed.

“It stuck, huh?”

We put our coats on, and headed outside. There was maybe ten centimeters of accumulation. The AP-1’s tracks could handle it.

Both of us had grown up in snow country, but I had never seen a scene like this before: fresh fallen snow as far as the eye could see, untread by anyone. Just making our mark on the snow was exciting. We laid down side-by-side on a slope and spread our arms to make snow angels, threw snowballs, made a half-hearted attempt at a snowman, and generally fooled around for a little while.

It got cold, so we made some instant corn soup in the parking lot and drank it. We had been looking around the area as we played, and were easily able to find the bridge a little way down the road.

It seemed likely to me that there was more to night in the other world than just the living creatures becoming more active. I was thinking that it warped time and space—or perhaps human perception of them, too. That had to be why no matter how far we drove last night, we never reached the bridge.

After finishing a breakfast consisting of soup, CalorieMate, and coffee, we prepared to set out. We checked the room that we had stayed in one last time to make sure we weren't missing anything. Then, loading our stuff on the AP-1, I started the engine.

Driving through the green vinyl curtain, we came out of the parking lot and onto the street.

The other world was shining white under the sun.

There were two tracks left behind us. After going a mere hundred meters or so, the bridge came into view. It was a Japanese-style bridge with scarlet railings, like something you might see over the river in a hot springs resort area.

We stopped the AP-1 in front of the bridge and got off for a moment. It would have been too scary to keep moving without checking that the bridge could handle our weight first. We crossed, using a shovel and long crowbar to feel around for any hidden holes. Not finding any unusual warping or damage, it seemed like our vehicle would be able to cross without issue.

Taking the same route back, we then recrossed the bridge on the AP-1. When we reached the opposite shore, we turned right, and drove alongside the river. Eventually, we found a slanted road that would take us down to the riverbed. We slowly descended the slope as I worried we were going to lose traction and slip, then proceeded across the rocky river beach. The ground here wasn't level, so this was the most uncomfortable part of the drive yet, but the movable track rollers Natsumi had installed absorbed the shock, making it a lot better than it could have been.

Once we had gone about ten minutes at low speed, we spotted a massive, familiar rock. This was where we'd set up the searchlight!

"We made it!" Toriko declared triumphantly.

"Hurrah!"

Our shouts echoed across the other world until they were absorbed by the fresh fallen snow.

Next to the giant rock was a natural shelter where no snow seemed to have accumulated, so we parked the AP-1 there.

"Yayyyy!" Toriko cried out.

"We did it!"

We high-fived each other. It looked like we could call our first long-distance expedition a success.

"Whew, I'm beat," said Toriko with a sigh. "Let's go home. I want

to take a shower.”

“Want to borrow one at the DS Lab?” I suggested.

“You think they’d let us?”

“I’ll bet they would.” I got down from the AP-1, and pulled my backpack and rifle off the luggage rack.

“The crowbars and other heavy stuff can stay here for now. Let’s put a sheet over it. We’ll take back just the stuff that might be damaged by the humidity.”

“Okay.”

“Now, as for the gate, let’s see... There it is.”

Snow had partially buried the pile of stones that indicated the location of the gate. It was faster to just look with my right eye.

“Let’s goooo.”

“Ah! Wait, hold on.” Toriko hurriedly called out to stop me, then started digging through her own backpack.

“What’s up?”

“Here. For you.”

What came out of her pack was a stylish wooden box. It was painted white, with an unfamiliar logo burned into it. I set my own baggage down on the snow, and accepted the box.

“What’s this?”

“A present. You can open it.”

I did as I was told, and slid open the lid. The inside of the box was lined with an orange suede material, and it contained two knives, side-by-side. Simple, pretty knives with wooden handles. They looked like the type that folded up. Comparing the two of them, they were slightly different sizes.

“The small one is yours.”

“Huh? Then what about this one?”

“It’s mine.”

Despite having said it was a present, Toriko reached out and took her own knife first. Folding it with a snap, she laid it flat on her palm.

“Look here.”

The back of the handle bore a similar brand to the box. It was a symbolic design—a flying bird. On the opposite side was a swimming fish.

“These are...”

“Yeah. Our symbols.”

The bird from her name, and the fish from mine.

“Th... This is pretty embarrassing, you know?”

“Oh, yeah? Well, if you don’t want it—”

“No, I do. I really do.” I reached out, but Toriko suddenly raised her voice.

“Ah! Wait, wait! I want to hand it to you myself.”

“O-Okay.”

Toriko lifted my knife out of the box, and placed it on her open palm. The blade was turned towards her, the handle to me.

“Will you accept it?”

The knife’s point was aimed directly at Toriko’s heart. Her indigo eyes stared directly into my own.

Toriko, it’s dangerous, looking into my right eye like that...

Despite thinking that, I couldn’t look away.

“...Of course.”

I reached out and took hold of the handle with its fish and bird symbols.

“What do you think? I tried to choose one you could use while camping.”

“Yeah...”

Testing my grip on it, I found it fit in my hand so well it was scary.

“This fits too well... Don’t tell me you measured my hand or something?”

“Huh? I can figure out that much without taking measurements.”

“O-Oh yeah?”

I tried folding the blade. Without needing to exert any excess force, it easily slid into the slot in the handle. Despite the seemingly simple shape, she had customized the size, and the symbols on them. These had to cost a pretty penny...

“Thanks. I like it. Seems easy to use.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“But why so suddenly? To celebrate our first long-distance expedition?”

“Well, it’s that kind of day, you know?”

“That kind of day?” I asked, not following her, and Toriko’s eyebrows drooped.

“Christmas is, well, it’s a family event. I thought you might have some bad memories, so I couldn’t bring it up, but...”

“Uh, what?”

“But watching you, it didn’t seem like you did. It was like you just weren’t thinking about Christmas at all, so—”

“Christmas?”

“Go figure.” Toriko sighed, seeing the confused look on my face. “Yesterday was the 24th. Today’s the 25th,” she explained.

Now that she mentioned it, I made the connection between the date and what was happening here. Looking down at the present in my hands, “...Oh. It’s Christmas,” I said, sounding like an idiot.

“That’s right. I’m glad I was able to give it to you.”

“Th... Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Christmas...

Oh, yes. I see now. That’s how it is, huh?

So, then... I spent Christmas Eve, of all nights, with Toriko, in a love hotel...?

It was a ruined one... and I threw up a lot, but still...

As I was thinking silly things, Toriko suddenly spoke up.

“Christmas Highway.”

“Huh? What?”

“That’s what we’ll name this road. Isn’t it great? That’s okay, right?”

I couldn’t say anything for a while, but once I finally regained my faculties of speech, I mumbled, “That’s... a good name you came up with...”

Every time we drive down this way, I was sure it would remind me of what happened.

“Good. It’s decided, then.”

Toriko smiled, not knowing how I felt.

“Merry Christmas, Sorawo!”

Works Referenced

This work uses many preexisting true ghost stories and pieces of net lore as its motif. In particular, this section will note those which have been used directly. This will touch on the content of the main book, so if you are concerned about spoilers, please tread carefully.

File 12: The Matter of That Farm

For the entry on “Yama no Bokujou” [The Farm in the Mountains], please refer to the section on File 11.

There are a number of other reports that revolve around strange farming facilities in the mountains. Though I have not used them directly, I do want to touch on them as a source of inspiration.

One is “Sankan no Machi” [The Town in the Mountains] included in Toshiki Agatsuma’s *Kikimimizoushi Juso* [Strange Tales: Curses] (Takeshobo, 2015). It’s about encountering a herd of cows with frightening faces at an uninhabited village in the mountains. The wife of the narrator, who is riding in the car with him, says that the cows’ faces look like the face of her boss.

The other is not from a written work, but a movie. It is “Neko Bokujou” [Cat Farm] included in *Korekutaa: Suzaku Monde* [Collector: Red Sparrow Departure] (Rakusosha, 2014). While driving through the mountains of Hokkaido, the narrator enters a ghost town, and in the barn of a farm there they find a man who crawls around on all-fours and is too large to be human, and witnesses a cat gazing down on them from the roof. The narrator’s girlfriend, who was in the car with him, says “That was no cat. It was a demon...”

These similar stories share important elements of their composition, but the details are so bizarre and different as to defy simple explanation.

The Kudan, a cow with the face of a person, is a story told in many places in western Japan, while the Cow Woman, a person with the face of a cow, has been repeatedly sighted around Mount Rokko. The first to link these two creatures was likely *Gendai Hyaku Monogatari Shinmimibukuro Daiichiya* [Modern-day 100 Stories, Shinmimibukuro, The First Night] (Hirokatsu Kihara/Ichirou Nakayama, Media Factory, 1998/Kadokawa Bunko, 2002). In this

work, there may seem to be no distinction made between the Kudan and the Cow Woman, but this is because the narrator, Sorawo, is telling the tale with the assumption that the two are connected.

Despite being big names, the Kudan and Cow Woman are not common fixtures in net lore. One of the few exceptions appeared on the 2channel message board's Occult/Paranormal Phenomena Board in "< < Yama ni Matsuwaru Kowai Hanashi Part 4 < < <" [< < Scary Stories Involving Mountains Part 4 < < <], posts 311-313 (11/28/2003) which include three stories of the Kudan by user Raimei Ichigou that he gathered in the Chugoku region. It's fascinating to know that the Kudan is not necessarily a cow with the face of a person; other animals with human faces can also be called Kudan.

File 13: Pandora in the Next Room

The famous net lore story "Pandora[Kinkisaki]" was posted to "Kowai Hanashi Toukou: Horaa Teraa" [Scary Story Submissions: Horror Teller] (11/02/2009). One month later, details of the ceremony performed in that story were posted on the same board (17/03/2009). This work borrows depictions from these two posts.

The portrayal of the neighbor opening the door with a strange hand is borrowed from the previously mentioned *Gendai Hyaku Monogatari Shinmimibukuro Daiichiya*'s 48th story, "Tonari no Onna" [The Woman Next Door].

File 14: The Inviting Hot Springs

The mannequins that appeared at the hot springs in were inspired by the story "Manekin" [Mannequin] which was posted to the 2channel message board's Occult/Paranormal Phenomena Board in "Shinu Hodo Share ni Naranai Kowai Hanashi wo Atsumete Minai?" [Do You Want to Gather Ridiculously Scary Stories?] thread 10, posts 412-424. It is a memorable story from the early days of that series of threads which tells the story of a group of friends who share a horrifying experience. Despite there being no paranormal phenomena involved, it still manages to be unsettling.

File 15: Overnight on the Otherside

The direct inspiration for the Red Person came from the "red, human-shaped thing" that appears at the door in "Houmonsha" [The Visitor], included in the collection *Gendai Hyaku Monogatari Shinmimibukuro Dairokuya* [Modern-day 100 Stories, Shinmimibukuro, The Sixth Night] (Hirokatsu Kihara/Ichirou Nakayama, Media Factory,

2001/Kadokawa Bunko, 2004). This story reports the sighting of a big, red person, standing over two meters tall, that rings the doorbell, and peers into the house through the decorative glass above the door. It is said to have taken place in the city of Higashimurayama.

In addition, on the 2channel message board's Occult/Paranormal Phenomena Board in the thread "Akai Hito ga Uchi ni Kita Koto ga Aru Hito Imasu?" [Anyone Ever Have a Red Person Come to Their House?] (07/05/2015) several people in addition to the thread starter wrote about having had the same experience.

The scene where Sorawo goes to a strange and different version of her elementary school uses images from posts 804 and 815 of the thread "Kodomo no Koro no Hen na Kioku Sono 14" [Strange Memories from Your Childhood #14] on the 2channel message board's Occult/Paranormal Phenomena Board. I am personally quite fond of this story, and am pleased to have finally been able to feature it here in the fourth volume. The title given to this story on aggregator sites, "Urasekai" [The Otherside], comes from the poster remembering the other world that appears in Dragon Quest 3, which they were playing at the time, and blurting out "I've ended up on the Otherside!" (The other world in the game is officially referred to as The World of Darkness, but I can understand why someone might want to call it the Otherside. That is because when I was a child, we talked a lot about "Uramen" [Secret Levels] and "Ura Suteeji" [Secret Stages] that could be reached by using secret techniques.)

I know I always say this, but I would like to give my thanks to the people who reported the many other true ghost stories and net lore from which I have taken direct or indirect influence.

Thank you for your continued enjoyment and for being frightened. I hope this book can repay my gratitude in some small way.



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by Iori Miyazawa

Illustrations by shirakaba

Translated by Sean McCann
Edited by Krys Loh

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